

Chapter 1: Halloween

On a cloudless night in Northern England, the tiny village of Godric's Hollow slept. All, that was, except for one small cottage on the outskirts. A cottage that most didn't even know existed. It was lit only by a single light on the ground floor, a light mostly blocked by the heavy black curtains that covered all of the windows, an inconspicuous building in every way.

Four black-cloaked figures made their way towards the little cottage. One was tall with black hair, his face strangely snake like and his eyes little more than glowing red slits. Another was a pale woman with long, jet-black hair and heavily lidded eyes. The third, a tall man with long blond hair tucked back into the hood of his robes. The last was a small and rather round man with protruding teeth, thinning brown hair, and small, watery eyes. He was clutching a piece of paper in his right hand, a paper that said:

The Potters may be found at 23 Hampton Ave in the Village of Godric's Hollow.

It was this man who had led the others to this small, sparsely populated village far from the major cities of England. The man that had betrayed his best friend, condemning the man's family to certain death.

The tallest figure, the man with the glowing red eyes, gestured for the three others to stop and hold their positions. He reached into his jet-black robes and carefully withdrew a slender stick of wood. Walking up to the door of the cottage, he whispered an incantation. There was a flash of light from within the doorknob, and the door silently unlocked. He pushed it open to reveal the shocked face of a bespectacled man with messy black hair, whose hazel eyes widened with fear and shock as he recognized the figure in the door.

"Hello, Potter," the man hissed, "you should have known it was only a matter of time. You cannot hide from Lord Voldemort."

"Lily!" the man yelled, "take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off—"

There was a gasp and a patter of footsteps as a woman with long red hair disappeared up a flight of stairs.

"It is pointless, Potter. I have disabled all Portkeys and thrown up Anti-Apparation Wards. You will die unless you step aside."

"You shall *not* harm my son you *bastard!*!" Potter snarled as he raised his own slender stick, "*Stupefy!*" A jet of red light flew out the end of Potter's wand at the cloaked figure he waved his own stick, and the spell bounced harmlessly off the ethereal blue shield the snake-like man had wordlessly erected.

"A Stunner, Potter? One would think you had better skill than that... *Disecpero!*" A slender beam of light shot out of the wand, expanding in width as it went. Potter barked, "*Protego!*" but it was too late to stop the entire spell as the powerful Severing Curse cut through the shield and hit Potter in the gut. He was knocked back into the wall.

The man laughed a high, cold, ruthless laugh. "*Crucio,*" he hissed. The air was filled with the sound of the man's screams as he convulsed and rolled along the ground. Finally, the red-eyed man lifted his wand, and said, "I grow tired of this, Potter."

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

A jet of green light struck the writhing man. He stiffened before he fell back to the floor, his eyes wide open and glassy, dead. The high, cold laugh of the snake-like man filled the room once more.

Lord Voldemort stepped over the dead body of James Potter and softly crept up the stairs. He strode down the hallway until he reached a small room across from the main bedroom. Inside, a terrified young woman desperately held a crying baby, who she had taken from his crib.

Lily Potter, her long red hair thrown back over her shoulders and her green eyes shining with defiance, stared down Lord Voldemort as few have done. But as Voldemort stalked forward, wand extended, her defiance gave way to desperation and fear. She clutched the baby tighter to herself.

"Please, not Harry...Have mercy, have mercy," she pleaded.

"Stand aside silly girl, stand aside."

He was so close to fulfilling the Prophecy and achieving immortality. He could smell it. Severus Snape would be rewarded beyond his wildest dreams for the information he had brought.

"No, not Harry, please, take me instead!" the woman pleaded again. The baby, a small child with a shock of jet-black hair and his mother's green eyes, wailed in Lily's arms. She clutched him tighter, shielding him from the monster. He'd wanted to end this without more killing. But what was one more murder to complete the path the eternal life?

Lord Voldemort let out a hiss that best resembled a sigh. "Avada Kedavra!"

The jet of green light connected with the woman, and she fell to the ground, her green eyes glassy and lifeless, staring into the abyss, dead as her husband. Her baby wailed at the sudden loss of his mother, as if he could sense that she was dead. The man stepped towards the young boy, a few months past his first birthday, still wrapped in his mother's arms. Had he been paying attention, he might have noticed the red sheen that was covering both mother and child. But Lord Voldemort was in a hurry.

Taking aim at the boy's forehead, he whispered, "Goodbye, Harry. Avada Kedavra!"

For the third time on this awful night, a jet of green light shot out of Voldemort's wand. But instead of connecting and wiping the life from the infant, the green light hit the red aura surrounding the baby, which flashed white. Lord Voldemort had nary a second before the light flashed back at him. He felt utter agony as the light ravaged his body, tearing his soul from him. His last thought was that of utter horror as he realized the mistake he had made.

And in the wreckage of the burning cottage, a baby, forehead now adorned with a bleeding, lighting-bolt shaped curse scar, wailed for his dead parents.

Minutes later, a lone woman appeared on the outskirts of the property with a small flash of smoke, and began striding determinedly forward.

A mere look at her was all it took to realize that this was not a woman to play around with, not if you planned to escape with all of your limbs intact. She moved with the cat-like grace of a trained dancer. Her slender build belied the woman's strength and endurance. Her steps were quick and decisive, and her grey-green eyes scanned the area, sizing up the terrain, any possible opposition, and potential dangers, more out of habit then by conscious effort.

The woman would have been quite attractive were it not for a number of imperfections. Her honey-blond hair trailed behind her, over her shoulders, just short enough that there was no need to tie it to keep it out of her face in combat. Her eyes, once filled with the childlike glee and innocence of any young witch who has just received her first Hogwarts letter, were now clouded with anguish and despair.

They say one's eyes are the window to the soul. Inside of her, behind the sorrow, lurked an evil presence, a vicious fury that did not always know friend from foe; a raw, searing anger that burned with the desire for vengeance.

But her most distinguishing facial features were a pair of relatively fresh scars. One, a long, wicked-looking blemish that ran from above her right eye down to her cheek. Another, a jagged scar on her neck that started beneath the left side of her chin and continued beneath her emerald-green robes. At the sight of the burning cottage, her mouth dropped open in shock and horror, as she realized that she had already failed.

She was dead. Her best friend, the woman she had grown to think of as closer than any sister, was dead.

Along with her husband, James, and her son, Harry, Lilly Rose Evans Potter was dead. It was almost too much. It wasn't fair. First her parents and infant brother, than Edmond, and now...

A sound pierced the air, the last sound that Daphne Artemis O'Connor Dressler would have expected to hear.

A faint baby's cry; a cry that carried with it the same pain and sorrow that was contained within the heart of this witch. A cry of a baby whose parents had been cruelly taken from him.

Harry.

She raced in through the open door, and stopped as she saw the dead body of James Potter, blood no longer flowing from a major stomach wound, his eyes dull and glassy; dead. But the crying was growing louder, as were the flames that had enveloped the small cottage. Without second thought, she raced up the stairs and into little Harry's room.

Powerful magic permeated the air, magic that stank of Darkness and was only associated with the Darkest of the Unforgivables; a curse that was feared by all who would not use it, and a curse that always killed. A curse that left no marks except for those on the hearts of its victims' loved ones.

Avada Kedavra.

Yet there was something else in this small room, the walls blown out by a tremendous explosion, what was left of the ceiling blackened and charred. A sense of love and protection that somehow overcame the darkness. Dreading what she'd see, Daphne focused on the sight before her. She felt her eyes burn with tears and an overwhelming nausea threaten to overtake her. She forced her eyes to look at the body.

Lilly Evans Potter lay on the floor next to the cradle, her eyes dull and glassy, the final victim of Lord Voldemort's reign of terror. Her dark red hair was spread out behind her like a halo, but her face was mockingly contorted in terror, her brilliant green eyes devoid of the life and intelligence Daphne had always associated with them. But her arms were wrapped around the source of the noise that had summoned Daphne here, a small infant with his mother's green eyes and father's jet-black hair. He was wailing now, and Grey Maiden supposed that shock had set in, the reason she only now knew that her 'nephew' was crying. Daphne noticed that his forehead was bloody, and reached for her wand to clean it. A burning ceiling rafter fell, and she knew she had to leave.

Gathering Harry gently into her arms, she turned to go, but then realized what Dumbledore and the Order would assume if Harry had vanished without a trace. So she summoned a parchment and quill, and wrote quickly:

To any who may find this,

Harry survived the attack, and I have reason to believe Voldemort's Killing Curse. I've taken him with me, to raise on my own. Do not attempt to follow me. You'll see him again when he's old enough for school.

D.A.D.

Hurriedly, she placed the parchment underneath Lily's left arm, which lay across her chest. With a final, heartbroken look at her best friend, she ran downstairs and cleared the Apparition wards. Harry was sound asleep in her arms. She ran outside, and with a final glimpse of the burning house, the glowing green skull and snake Dark Mark above it, she vanished with a CRACK.

Merely seconds later, another noise resounded around the area, and a man with blue eyes and long black hair appeared on a huge motorcycle. The engine revved loudly as he brought the flying vehicle in for a landing and jumped off. He took once glance at the sight before him and broke down, falling to his knees with anguished sobs. For he didn't even need to see the bodies to know that his two best friends were dead. They had failed.

Peter.

Pettigrew had betrayed them, he knew that now. And it was Sirius's fault they were dead, for he had made the brilliant decision to switch at the last moment. He'd been there, where Peter was hiding. The building was empty, but there was no sign of a struggle. He hadn't been captured; he had gone to his master.

He had delivered them right into Voldemort's hands.

And Peter would pay.

Oh, yes, he would pay for this.

There was a flash of light from behind him, and Sirius Orion Black spun around, wand drawn. But he lowered it at the sight of a HUGE black-haired and bearded man, clutching a pink umbrella, and what appeared to be an old trainer, although Sirius knew it to be a Portkey. The giant of a man looked harmless at the moment though; he was leaning on his pink umbrella and bawling like a baby when he gazed at the scene of destruction in front of him.

“Sirius Black?” the man asked through his tears. Sirius nodded, his face never leaving the burning house. He wanted to go see if anyone was alive, or at least move the bodies. But he couldn’t move. He couldn’t get it through his head that he would never see James or Lily again. *My god, we thought it was Remus. Merlin, it’s my fault they are dead! I as good as killed them!*

Through his choked sobs, Sirius felt Rubeus Hagrid walk over to him and place a trashcan lid-sized hand on his shoulder. “S’gonna be alright Sirius,” he mumbled. Suddenly, he removed the hand. “Sirius? Have you looked for Harry? He’s probably...you know, but...”

As if scalded, Sirius ran into the house, clearing the way with a quick *Aguamenti* charm. He ran through the front door and froze when he saw the body of his best friend. Still, he could mourn later. He hurried up the stairs towards the baby’s room. The walls along the hallway were blackened and scorched, and the faint sense of powerful magic hung in the air. He found Lily dead, lying next to the baby’s cradle. The cradle itself was empty, and for a moment, Sirius thought that Voldemort might have taken the child. But a piece of parchment held in place by Lily Potter’s left arm caught his attention, and gingerly removing the limp limb, he carefully unfolded the parchment, ignoring the fire burning around him.

He read the message and the blood drained from his face. His features changed from baffled to sudden recognition as he realized who had taken his godson. He slipped the paper into the pocket of his robes.

Picking up Lily’s body, Sirius cradled her gently in his arms. He carried her downstairs. She deserved a proper wizarding funeral. He

looked around the living room to see that Hagrid had already picked up James's body. He glanced at Sirius for a sign of Harry's fate, but Sirius gestured out the door. As he exited, the fire picked up in intensity, and the upper floor caved in, causing the ground floor to be enveloped in flames. They just made it out in time. Somehow, the glowing green of the Dark Mark and the flames now leaping into the sky hadn't alerted the Muggles living in the village. Though it was possible the Fidelus Charm was still in operation, it was more likely that the Muggle-repelling wards had managed to survive the destruction of the house.

Sirius gently laid Lily Potter's body next to that of her husband and ran over to Hagrid. "Hagrid, Harry's alive. But he isn't *here*. Read this," he said, handing the paper to the half-giant. He suddenly stiffened.

"Who's D.A.D, Sirius? An' where's 'Arry?"

"Do you know Daphne Dressler? Maiden name O'Connor?"

"Sure, she was Lily's friend, wasn't she?"

"Yes. Hagrid, I've got something I need to do. You can have my motorcycle, I won't be needing it."

"Ok, Sirius, but what-"

"No time. Give Dumbledore my regards."

Sirius, hell-bent on avenging his friend's murder, apparated away to begin the hunt of his former friend. In his haste, he neglected to mention the very evidence that would prove his innocence.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore apparated to the site of the Potter's Home expecting to find it deserted. At his side was his Transfiguration Professor and second in command of the Order of the Phoenix, Minerva McGonagall. Dumbledore was a very tall man with long white hair and an even longer beard. He wore golden spectacles that slightly magnified his blue eyes, eyes normally full of an unusual twinkle when he was amused. However his eyes had no such twinkle.

He wore long purple robes, and the look of his face was that of regret and sorrow for the loss of a pair of wonderful friends.

Beside him, McGonagall was a rather severe looking woman with a lined face and graying black hair pulled back into a ponytail. She wore emerald robes, and tears were streaking down her face as she struggled to keep her composure.

“Hagrid?” Dumbledore asked a hint of confusion showing in his voice. “Why have you not taken Harry to Hogwarts so that he can be taken to his relatives?”

“Uh, Professor, ‘Arry isn’t there,” Hagrid said nervously. He looked up to Dumbledore like a father, and was ashamed that he had failed when such an important task had been given to him.

“What do you mean, Hagrid?” McGonagall asked in a Scottish brogue. “He lives, does he not?”

“Yessir. Problem is, somebody got here first. Sirius and I got here second.”

“*Sirius Black?*” McGonagall asked, shocked. “Wasn’t *he* the Potter’s Secret Keeper? What did he say?”

“HE WAS?” Hagrid roared, “I SHOULDA KILLED THE MURDERIN’ TRAITOR!”

“Rubeus, please,” Dumbledore said, weariness in his voice. “We didn’t know that Sirius had taken the path of his family. I must say I am shocked. However, nothing is certain in this war. Except the fact that Lord Voldemort, for now, has gone.”

“He’s really dead then, Albus?” McGonagall asked, “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is dead at last? We’ve won?”

“For now, Lord Voldemort is gone. However, I do not doubt that he remains in some form. But yes, for now, we have won the battle. The war is yet to be fought, he replied cryptically. “But what of young Harry?”

"The *traitor* gave me this sir," Hagrid said roughly. "Got it off Lily's body, they're over there by the way," he said, pointing in the direction of the bodies. He handed Dumbledore the note. McGonagall hurried over and let out a gasp. "*Daphne?*"

"I believe Mrs. Dressler has indeed taken Harry. Where and why, I cannot say," Dumbledore said, thoughtfully. "It is obvious that she intends to keep him away from me, for whatever reason. Come now, let us bring James and Lily back to Hogwarts, and we will discuss this later."

"I got Lily, sir," Hagrid said.

"And I'll," McGonagall sniffed, "get James."

Holding gently onto the two bodies of their departed friends, the three apparated back to Hogsmeade, before hurrying up to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Daphne Dressler and her infant cargo arrived at the gates of the ancestral home of her late husband's family. Edmond Dressler had been the only son of a very wealthy pureblood family, and the most kind and loving man that Daphne had ever known. She didn't plan to even stay the night here. She needed to get away from Dumbledore, and that meant getting out of the country. She'd already decided on what spells to use to make Harry and her unplotable and unlocatable.

Harry was sleeping soundly at the moment.

She used a cleaning charm on his bloody forehead, and then a basic Healing Charm. She was shocked to discover that the lightning-bolt shaped cut had already vanished, leaving in its place a wicked-looking, thin scar. She had a feeling that it was a result of the Killing Curse. *But then how was Harry still alive?*

She didn't have time to ponder that now. Gently rocking him back and forth in her arms, she walked up to the front door of the estate, opened it (the wards were keyed to accept her), and was met by a picture that broke her heart all over again. It was their wedding picture. It depicted a vibrant young woman with bright grey-green

eyes, shining honey-blond hair, and a beautiful silk wedding gown, wearing a bright smile, her arm wrapped around a tall man with boyish features, short brown hair, bright blue eyes, and a goatee, wearing handsome green robes and a dazzling grin. Behind them stood a stately looking woman with graying brown hair pulled into a bun, and a beaming elderly man with bright blue eyes and straw-colored hair. It was of Clarice and Thomas Dressler, and their newlywed son and daughter-in-law, Daphne Artemis O'Connor and Edmond Samuel Dressler.

She was shook out of her daze by the sight of a rather old, ragged-looking house-elf. However, the small creature's feature's lit up when he saw her standing in the doorway.

"Mistress Daphne, ma'am," the house-elf bowed low, "It is so good to be seeing you again. Who is the small master?"

"This is Harry, Yonky, Harry Potter."

"Mistress Lily's son, ma'am?" the house-elf asked, his eyes lighting up in excitement.

"Yes, Yonky. Could you take care of him while I make preparations? I plan to leave England for our home in Newfoundland."

"Yes, Yonky knows how to take care of small masters. Yonky took care of Master Edmond when he was much smaller. Yonky was very sad indeed to hear of Master Edmond's passing," the house-elf said, sniffing into its otherwise neat pillowcase.

Daphne felt her eyes watering, and took a deep breath, trying to hold back the tears. She still couldn't believe he was really gone. It seemed only yesterday that Edmond and she were discussing possibly starting a family. They had decided they would start one as soon as they could.

She would never have a son or daughter of her own, now.

No, she corrected herself. I have Harry. I owe Lily so much, and I am going to raise her son as she would have. I am going to give him the

love and affection deserving of my own child. It's the least I can do. He's already suffered so much.

Their decision happened four days before the attack.

They had come in the dead of night, when Edmond was downstairs getting a late-night meal. There had been six of them, led by the Death Eater who had murdered the Prewetts, the skeletal Antonin Dolohov, and one of Voldemort's chief lieutenants, a man named Evan Rosier. They had ambushed Edmond, who had fought a brief duel before he was struck with a Killing Curse. Enraged and maddened by grief, she had run down the stairs and began firing off powerful curses at random, many of them Dark. The Death Eaters scattered, stunned by the raw power of her outburst. They hid behind upturned furniture, firing back at her. Dolohov had hit her with a deflected Slicing Curse, half-blinding her and giving her the ugly scar she carried as a trophy. She had ended up killing Rosier, and blowing another Death Eater's head into pieces with a Blasting Hex. She had grabbed her husband's body and activated her Portkey, spiriting them to St. Mungo's. She had gotten medical attention, and then fled to her home in London, unable to face her friends. Until the night when the alarm spells that Daphne had personally placed around Godric's Hollow had gone off.

She hurried up to her bedroom to pack. She needed to be gone soon, before Dumbledore could catch up with her. She waved her wand, and her necessary clothes and personal items flew into her trunk. It was easy: she already had them laid out in her mind. She knew they'd be able to access both the Potter's and her accounts overseas, though she didn't intend to rely on Lily and James's generosity. The Dresslers were a very wealthy family, and she had enough funds to raise a wizard boy without needing a source of employment.

She charmed the trunk to float and follow her, and ran back downstairs. Floppy, the Dressler's other house elf, a female, had baby Harry in her arms, and was rocking him gently. The baby appeared to be sleeping soundly. She wondered absently if she'd have to nurse him.

Not that she wasn't willing to. She would do anything for Lily. As she knew Lily would have done anything for her. And saving Harry from Lily's horrible relatives, where Dumbledore, no doubt, would have sent him, was a way of paying back that debt. She knew of the old wizard's trust in blood magic. But the only time she had met Petunia and her husband, she had instantly disliked them. Vernon was crude and distrustful of anything out of the ordinary. Petunia was a paranoid and pretentious woman who despised the success of her sister. No, Harry would *not* be sent to live with them.

Speaking of Harry, Daphne had very little she could bring for him. There were no baby clothes in Dressler Manor. If worse came to worst, she could always Transfigure Muggle children's clothing into what she needed. Yes, she had everything. She would leave Dressler Manor in the capable hands of the family house-elves.

"Floppy, I'm taking Harry away now. We won't be back for a long time."

The house-elf looked crestfallen. Apparently, she had fallen in love with the small black-haired baby. "Very well, Mistress Daphne. Floppy and Yonky will take care of the house while Mistress Daphne and Master Harry are gone."

With a final nod to the house-elf, she took the baby out of her arms and pulled him gently to her chest, cuddling him in her soft, emerald-green robes that perfectly matched the color of his and Lily's eyes. She took out her old broom, a Cleansweep 6, and tapped it once, thinking clearly of the small house the Dresslers owned in Newfoundland, while muttering, "*Portus*." The broom glowed blue for a moment, then faded. She didn't care about the illegal Portkey; the Ministry wouldn't find her in Canada either. Grasping her trunk and Harry securely, she spoke the activation words softly, "*New Beginnings*," then placed her hand onto the broom. Harry let out a cry as she felt a tug behind her navel, and the world disappeared in blur of colors.

Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Filius Flitwick, and the remaining member of the Order of Phoenix stood in a loose circle in

the middle of the Great Hall of Hogwarts. The house tables had been shoved to the walls, with only a circular table in its place. It made the massive room seem rather empty.

The entire Order was waiting, spellbound, for Dumbledore to continue his story on the fall of Voldemort. Most simply couldn't believe that the war they'd been fighting for so long was for the time being, over. The Death Eaters were now leaderless and ineffective, and it was only a matter of time before they were rounded up and thrown into Azkaban to rot for the rest of their lives. England was going to wake up to the wonderful reality of no more Lord Voldemort, no more reign of terror.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, a tall black wizard with a hoop earring and shaved head, asked quietly, "How, Dumbledore? How did this happen?"

"Ah, yes, Kingsley. It seems that Lord Voldemort was undone by a baby, a baby named Harry Potter. Unfortunately, James and Lily appear to have been the final victims of Voldemort's reign."

There were a number of gasps, and several women broke into tears. The Potters had been extremely well liked, especially within the resistance against Voldemort.

"But how did this child defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" the wheezy-voiced Elphias Dodge asked. "And where is the boy now?"

"I do not know, Elphias, how young Harry defeated the Killing Curse that was cast upon him."

Whispers and gasps followed this announcement.

"He survived the Killing Curse?" Arthur Weasley asked quietly.

"I believe so," Dumbledore said. "It appears that Lord Voldemort cast the curse at Harry and it was somehow reflected back at him, ripping his own soul from his body. He is gone for now. As for Harry, he is safe, to the extent of my knowledge."

"What do you mean by that Albus?" Alastor Moody growled. "To the extent of your knowledge?"

"Yes. It appears that someone got to Godric's Hollow before we did, and took young Harry with them. It appears to have been Daphne Dressler, based on the note she left with Lily's body. It also appears she plans to raise him on her own. I don't believe I'll be able to do anything, as she is quite an expert with all kinds of tracking counter-spells, and one of the best Aurors in recent history. We can only hope for the best."

The Next Day:

Sirius Orion Black prowled through the streets of Muggle London, hunting his prey. He ducked down one alleyway, his keen sense of smell zeroing in on the Rat, as he had dubbed him. He emerged from the alleyway, and moved into a large crowd of Muggles who were shopping.

Then Sirius spotted him.

He was furtively sneaking around through the crowds of Muggles, his wand sticking out of his pocket, his watery eyes scanning for pursuers. Every so often he would sniff the air. Sirius's eyes narrowed, and he stalked forward. Pettigrew spotted him, and his watery eyes widened in fear and *shock*. He raced into the alleyway for a place to transform. Sirius raced after him, and fired the first spell, an Anti-Disapparition Spell that connected with Pettigrew's arm.

Pettigrew stopped, pulling out his own wand, sweating now as Sirius approached.

"*You bastard. You lying, sniveling, traitorous bastard! HOW COULD YOU DO THAT TO LILY AND JAMES! ANSWER ME!*" Sirius roared, losing his teetering self-control. He was going to kill Peter, *oh yes he was*.

Pettigrew cowered, and then suddenly took off again, running into the middle of a crowded street. Sirius stalked forward, damning the

Statute of Secrecy. Muggles could be Obliviated, James and Lily could not be brought back to life.

He raised his wand, ready to incant a curse, and then stopped.

Pettigrew was fumbling with something. He caught a flash of silver and realized it was a knife. Before he could call out, Pettigrew cut off a finger on his left hand then rubbed the bleeding wound all over his robes. Sirius raised his wand again, realizing what Pettigrew was trying to do. He didn't see the wand that Pettigrew was now fumbling with behind his back with his good hand.

"Lilly and James, Sirius! How could you!" he yelled, false tears rolling down his cheeks. Sirius was about to roll his eyes and hex Pettigrew into oblivion when he saw the wand tip pointing at the street. "*Diffin-*"

"*REDUCTO!*" Pettigrew bellowed. The Blasting Hex slammed into the street and caused a massive explosion behind Pettigrew, sending Muggles flying into the air as screams broke out everywhere. The blast also knocked Sirius flat, though he got up just in time to see a rat with a missing toe on his left forepaw run into the wide, smoking crater that he had just created.

His ears ringing from the blast, Sirius unsteadily got to his feet, and surveyed the wide-spread devastation. Muggles lay bleeding all around the crater, and he could see at least ten who didn't look like they would get up again. Suddenly, the air was filled with CRACKs, as red-robed Aurors and grey-robed hit-wizards, along with members of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad and a team of Healers appeared in the square. The AMRS immediately threw up barriers to prevent the hysterical Muggles from fleeing the scene.

Sirius stood in the middle of the circle. He saw the faces of several of his fellow Aurors, including the ruthless and cunning Rufus Scrimgeour, who was looking at Sirius like he was Lord Voldemort reincarnated. Cornelius Fudge, one of the top candidates in the upcoming election, was there, along with Barty Crouch. Based on the position of the people around him, Sirius realized he must have been knocked unconscious.

The other thing he registered was that his wand was hanging limply at his side, and that every single other wand in the vicinity was pointed directly at him. He suddenly realized what this must look like, especially since everyone believed that he was the Secret Keeper of the Potters. It appeared to everyone that he had just murdered Peter Pettigrew and at least a dozen Muggles. He was trapped.

Scrimgeour stepped forward, wand still pointed at Sirius's heart. "Put the wand down, Black, it's over," he said in an ice-cold voice.

Sirius dropped his wand to the ground, still numb from the horrific turn of events. He dumbly stared around at the angry faces of his colleagues and friends. They all believed that *he* was a traitor. They believed that he, like his foolish brother, had joined Lord Voldemort. And now Voldemort was dead. And Sirius began to laugh maniacally at the absurdity of it all. All the while, tears of grief and despair streamed down his face. But he couldn't stop laughing. If it hadn't have been him, it would have been hilarious. Two days ago, Remus was the informant. Peter was innocent. James, Lily, and Harry were alive and in hiding. Voldemort still cast a dark shadow over Europe.

How things had changed.

He didn't notice Mad-Eye's Stunner until it was far too late.

Chapter 2: Raising Harry Potter

Lying several miles inland from where the rocky coast of of the Canadian island of Newfoundland met the frigid waters of Placentia Bay, the wizarding community of Claw's Clan was mostly unknown by foreign wizards and Muggles alike. The small settlement was home to only a few hundred wizards, and was far outside the mainstream of the wizarding world. Hence, Daphne Artemis Dressler thought, it was the perfect place to raised Lily's son.

Daphne was known in the community as Alison Dressler, and ostensibly lived alone with her son, James Dressler. Daphne could only imagine how shocked the members of the community would be to discover that the precocious, intelligent youth was in reality the 'savior' of the wizarding world, Harry James Potter.

Daphne smiled as she gazed out the kitchen window at the four figures occupying the warded and charmed area she had created for flying. Harry was easily the best flyer of the group, two of whom were actually in the air. The third was sitting on the ground beneath a tree, her nose buried in a Herbology magazine. A far more sensible place, Daphne felt. She'd never really enjoyed flying.

Harry climbed higher on his Cleansweep 6, outrunning Connor Toland easily.

Connor was a short, lanky boy with bright brown eyes, long blondish hair, and a bright, childish grin that seemed permanently etched into his face. He was also quite a hockey enthusiast, a Toronto Maple Leafs fan, though interest in Muggle sports leagues like the NHL was fairly limited in this wizard community near the coast of Newfoundland. Connor, in vain, had attempted to get Alison's 'son' interested in the high speed game. But Harry showed little interest because it took place on the ground. While Harry loved to fly, practically the only sport he was interested in, he wasn't very familiar with Quidditch, as it was not played professionally in Newfound. Dressler was never much a fan of Quidditch, and saw no need to encourage her 'son's' participation in such a dangerous game. Then again, the aerial version of tag that the three boys were playing wasn't that much safer. Still, Daphne knew that Harry would probably get immersed in

Quidditch as soon as he started attending Hogwarts. And if his aerial skills and Chaser background had anything to say about it, he'd probably end up starting for a House Team.

She watched in amusement as Tanner Dowling, a tall black boy with long hair braided into dreadlocks and a curious interest in animals of all sorts, tried in vain to knock Harry off his broom. If one of them were to fall, of course, there would be little problem. The first thing Daphne did when she got up in the morning was to reinforce the Cushioning Charm around the field that the boys used for flying.

On the ground (a much more sensible place to be), Patricia Roberts, a small girl with black hair, pigtails and vibrant blue eyes, sat patiently, reading a magazine on Herbology. The young girl loved plants as much as Tanner loved animals, and while she never actively tried to push information at the boys, it couldn't be helped sometimes. Still, all of them were close friends, and had assumed they would remain so even if they would spend their school years on separate continents. Of course, they still didn't know of Harry's real identity, but both she and Harry were convinced that they wouldn't really care one way or the other. Harry was still thinking about when he would reveal who he really was. It was also possible that they'd simply forget about one another, and move on. She hoped fervently for the former.

Daphne turned away from the window, and looked over at her dresser. On top were a number of pictures, including her wedding photo and a picture with Lily and James that she had brought with her when she left England behind.

Also, a picture of a black-haired toddler sitting on the ground gnawing on his foot. Another of a six-year black-haired child with a small black haired girl, and a skinny blond haired boy. The picture of Harry, Patricia, and Connor had been taken in mid-winter, and the children were tightly bundled in multicolored Muggle snow jackets with scarves and hats. Little Trish was almost buried by the multiple layers. Another picture depicted Harry's 8th birthday party, and featured Tanner, as well as a few Muggle children that Harry had befriended.

As she looked over the images, her mind flashed back to the events leading to this clear, cool summer's day. She and Harry had arrived

without any major problems via Portkey in the front hall of the small vacation home. In the days following their arrival, she had constructed their identities.

Alison Dressler was a researcher who had lost her husband in the war against Voldemort, and her husband was a relative of the Dresslers who had once owned the home. James Dressler was her son, who greatly resembled his father. Conveniently, Harry did have some of Daphne's facial features, so the resemblance was not horribly off. His well-known lightning-bolt scar was covered by a Glamour Charm. Daphne had been surprised to discover that the wards of Godric's Hollow had made this precaution necessary, as they photographed anyone who crossed the property lines. She certainly didn't remember Lily mentioning *that* when they were discussing the steps taken to insuring the security of the Potters. The result was that a black-and-white image of her and Harry had been splashed across the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, under the headlines: **HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED DEFEATED, SAVIOR VANISHES MYSTERIOUSLY.**

Harry was sent to school with the other young wizarding children at the local Muggle Nursery, in the town of Garland, about six miles west of Claw's Clan. He was also, from a very young age, at the very top of his class. He learned to read by the age of four, (helped along by Daphne,) and was reading books far beyond his age level. His friends were also very bright individuals. Daphne was amazed by how much like Lily Harry was; inquisitive, kind, and very quiet most of the time, but a boy who spoke his mind when he needed to. He also seemed to be quite stubborn, a trait that Daphne would have been amazed if he *hadn't* inherited, considering his parentage.

While composed and polite most of the time, Harry could have a towering temper when things went too far.

He wore his jet-black hair *exactly* the same as his father, and it stuck up in the back the same way. He wore glasses, behind which were Lily's beautiful emerald-green eyes. They displayed intelligence, an inquisitive nature and a level-headedness that she adored.

He made the hearts of most adults melt at the sight of him. He did, however, enjoy pranks to a degree, another thing that wasn't a surprise, considering that his father and friends had terrified Hogwarts faculty during their school days. It was in these situations that his natural cunning and cleverness came out. His devious side was more from Lily than his father; James had not been very graceful when caught. James tended to rely on *not* getting caught.

As for his parents, Daphne hadn't had the heart to wait long after he was old enough to understand to explain what had happened to them. Harry had been very upset at first, but he calmed, and eventually accepted it. However, he'd later started suffering terrible nightmares of his parent's deaths. Daphne had helped put his mind at ease by explaining what the green light was. Overall, Harry had handled it quite well. He had also understood that she wasn't his mother, but she might as well have been. She loved him dearly, and he returned the affection to his "Aunt Daph." Or Ali, depending on the context.

As for who *he* was, that had taken longer. Daphne had done her best to keep up on events happening in wizarding Britain. Harry had been credited with the fall of Voldemort, as accurate or inaccurate as that may have been, and his name was known throughout the world.

November 1st, 1981, had been declared "Harry Potter Day." Dumbledore, as adept in politics as any wizard, had declared that Harry had gone "into hiding," to protect himself from followers of the Dark Lord seeking vengeance. It was accurate enough; the only problem was that Dumbledore didn't actually know where Harry was. Still, she'd have to prepare him for the 'welcome' he would receive.

Daphne never for a moment regretted taking Harry from that burning building as a baby and fleeing the country. They had both needed healing, and she knew where Dumbledore was going to have placed Harry. She couldn't let that happen. Lily had introduced her to the Dursleys once, and she had disliked them on sight. Vernon Dursley was loud, boisterous, superstitious and had a vicious temper. Petunia was a suspicious neat-freak, who relied on putting other people beneath her in order to make her life worth something. She couldn't imagine that family being anything less than cold and intolerant of Harry, and at worst, abusive. Lily may not have seen it, but Daphne

was an expert on judging people, one of the tools of her trade as a top Auror. She didn't like these people, and Harry deserved far better.

As she watched the boys come down to the ground and summon 'Trish,' as Patricia was called, over for a conversation, Daphne thought back to the conversation she had had with Harry about two weeks earlier. She had decided it was time for him to know why she insisted on keeping their identities a secret, and what was so important about the lightning-bolt scar.

Harry had been sitting in the study in front of a roaring fire, his feet propped up a footstool, sunken back into a blue arm chair. In his hand he held a copy of The Chronicles of Narnia, an interesting Muggle book written about a magical world that was located inside a wardrobe. He had read it several times, and the book was battered from use. His aunt had actually held several discussions with him, talking about what in the book was accurate to the real magical world.

Daphne approached with a heavy heart, but knew that she had to do this soon. Harry had turned eleven the previous day, July 31st. It was only a matter of time before the owl arrived that would announce Harry's acceptance to Hogwarts. Even if it didn't, Daphne and Harry had considered all possible magical schools and decided on Hogwarts as the best choice, even over the Magic Academy of Ottawa, a school that wasn't well known in wizarding Britain, but had an excellent reputation on the other side of the Atlantic.

"Harry?" she asked tentatively. Her adopted son looked up over the top of his book. He caught her "serious discussion coming" look and put down the book onto the table. He looked her in the eyes.

"Yes, Daph?" he asked politely.

"Harry, we have something we need to talk about. You aren't in trouble, don't worry. It's just something I've been putting off for a long time."

"Alright, go."

"You know about how your parents died," Harry nodded, "well, you did something that night. Two things actually. I'm not sure how to put this...but the name Harry Potter is known all over the world."

Harry looked puzzled. "Why? What could I have done?"

There was enough hesitation in his voice to show that he was uncomfortable talking about his parent's deaths.

"You did something that no one can fully explain, though I think I've been able to piece it together. Do you remember when I entered your mind after some of your bad nightmares? It was called Legilimency."
Harry nodded.

"You remember what I've taught you about Voldemort, about the first war, right? Well, have you ever wondered what happened to him?"

"Yes, actually. I'd been searching the books that you've given me, but they all seem to cut off the year I was born," Harry said. Intelligence and maturity shined through his eyes.

"Well, Harry, that's because the night that Voldemort came after your parents, he disappeared. It was, in effect, the end of the war. From what I can tell by your memories, he cast the Killing Curse at you. The Killing Curse is one of the Unforgivables, one of the curses that earn you a one-way ticket to Azkaban if used. That's because when it hits, it always kills. No shield can stop it," she said slowly, trying to make sure Harry understood. He frowned.

"Then why am I still here?" Harry asked quietly.

"Because you survived. And the curse was reflected back at Voldemort, killing him. That's why you're famous. You're the Boy-Who-Lived, the only known survivor of the Killing Curse and the person that vanquished You-Know-Who."

"I...How?" Harry asked his voice much higher than normal. His eyes were wide open in shock and horror.

"No one knows for certain, but I think I've figured out a possible explanation. Lily did everything she could to save your life and she

loved you literally more than life itself. I think that when Voldemort killed her..." she let out a sniffle; she hated talking about this. She looked up and saw that Harry had tears in his eyes. She reached her arms out and captured him in a fierce embrace. She was amazed by how much she loved this boy. He was everything to her, all she had left.

Finally, they broke apart. Fighting back another sniffled, she asked, "Do you want me to stop?" Harry shook his head, blinking tears from his eyes.

"Alright...Lily's sacrifice created a kind of very old magic. Magic linked directly to deep love, both filial and spousal. In your case, your mother's love for you created a shield of her magic. She was a very powerful witch, and her magic and love for you was so great that it managed to deflect a curse that no one else had ever survived. That's why you are famous, Harry."

She looked up at him. He was huddled up, his knees pulled into his chest, his head buried in his hands. He was also shaking.

"Why..me? I don't want to be famous...I want my mum..."

"Oh, Harry!" she cried, pulling him into another embrace. It was so unfair for such a small child to be handed such a big burden. She also knew there was more. A Prophecy of some sort, made before Harry's birth. She didn't know the contents, but she would make it a point to find out. She wanted to know what fate had in mind for her adopted son.

"Thanks...Daph," he sniffled. "I'm sorry...I'm too big for this-

"Stop, Harry. You've gone through much more than anyone else your age. Showing emotion is not a bad thing. Just keep that temper of yours in check, okay?" she said with a sad smile. Harry smiled back, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Anyway, you see why you needed to know? Are you mad at me for keeping this from you? You were just having such a good year, and I didn't want to ruin it."

"I'm not, Aunt Daph. I'm just kind of shocked. And I understand now why we've been hiding."

"Well, Harry, it isn't just that, though that's why I've covered up your scar. Do you want to have it visible for when you go to Hogwarts?"

"I don't know. It's probably best I have it, just so people know that yes, it's really there, and no, I'm not going to constantly remove the Glamour."

Daphne smiled. It amazed her how knowledgeable about the world that Harry was at the tender age of eleven.

"That's probably a good idea. The other reason is, well, complicated. The Headmaster of Hogwarts is a great wizard, Albus Dumbledore. You've read about him?" Harry nodded and smiled.

"Well, he's very powerful and a great leader. But he also makes mistakes, like any human being. And he has a trust in what's called Blood Magic. Do you know what that is?" Harry shook his head.

"Well, do you remember what I told you about the wards on Dressler Manor?" Harry nodded. "They only accept family members or specified guests."

"Yes., I think Dumbledore figured out that you had survived because of your mother's sacrifice. It's not common, but it's not unheard of, the difference being, it's never been known to block a Killing Curse. It probably only worked because it was so soon after..." Harry nodded, tears glistening in his eyes.

Daphne reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Well, I believe that that protection may run in your blood. That's what happens with Old Magic like that, it tended to run in bloodlines. You have one remaining blood relative, Petunia Dursley, Lily's sister. However, I judged that you would not fit in well at all there. I would actually be scared for your safety. Trust me, they are not very good human beings."

Harry nodded. "You know me better than anyone."

"Thanks, Harry. That means a lot." She reached out and ruffled his hair. He scowled, then started laughing. Daphne cracked up seconds later. He was such a wonderful boy.

"Alright," he said. "I understand everything you've told me, and why. What I want to know is, why now?"

"Well, Harry, in the next few weeks I'm expecting a letter. A letter that will announce your acceptance into Hogwarts. We both agree you want to go there, right?" Harry nodded. "Well, we're going to go a bit early. I intend to have a bit of a chat with Albus. Alright?"

Harry nodded, then got off the chair and pulled his aunt into an embrace. Daphne returned it, then kissed him on the forehead and ruffled his hair. He scowled again, grabbed his book and walked towards his room. "Harry?" Daphne asked. He turned. "Yes?"

"Will you be okay tonight?"

"I think so."

"Alright. Remember I'm always there. I'm afraid talking about this might bring your nightmares back."

Harry smiled at her, nodded, and ran up the stairs to his bedroom.

Daphne sighed as she remembered that day. It had gone much better than she could have imagined. Harry had accepted his identity with a heavy heart, but also with a maturity that he had always shown. She had tried desperately to raise Harry to be respectful and polite, but also allow his natural talent to flourish. She hoped she'd done just that.

As she was thinking about the possibility of letting Harry go off to school for three fourths of the year, a very weary tawny brown owl soared through the open kitchen window. It deposited a letter into her hands, then soared off again. She spotted the yellowish parchment, and then the Hogwarts Seal of a Lion, a Serpent, a Badger, and a Raven. Her heart began to beat faster. She turned over the letter.

Mr. Harry J. Potter-Dressler

16 Hobart Road

Claw's Clan

Newfoundland

She let out an amused smirk. “Well, well, Dumbledore, I’m impressed. You’ve finally beaten me at my own game.”

She pocketed the letter.

Harry Potter bid farewell to his three best friends as they headed home for dinner. As they ran out of sight, he sighed and turned to go back into the small, two-story home that he had lived in for most of his life. The solid, rock-faced building was very old, but was sturdy even without the magic supporting the foundations. It was a beautiful little home.

Harry walked up to the front and opened the door, closing it quietly behind him. He kicked off his shoes and headed for the kitchen, where he could smell his aunt’s cooking. Daph wasn’t a world-renowned chef, but her food was the best he’d ever known. There weren’t many fine restaurants in this part of the world.

He entered the kitchen, and he saw Daphne look up at him, a pleased look on her face. “Harry, it came,” she said simply, before returning the meal she was making, a kind of beef stew.

“What came?” Harry asked.

“Your Hogwarts letter. It’s on the table.”

Harry’s features lit up into a grin. He’d been waiting for years to be accepted into the same school that his mum, dad, and aunt had attended. Daph hadn’t insisted he go there, in fact, she encouraged him to do the research and determine whether or not staying with his friends was worth passing up the best possible education. True to his nature, Harry had chosen the latter.

He walked over to the table and found an envelope with the Hogwarts Seal on it, and also his address. He frowned. "Aunt Daph, how did they know where we live?"

Daphne laughed, a rich, melodious sound that Harry loved. "Did you really think we could hide from Dumbledore forever, Harry? It was only a matter of time. Fortunately, he decided not to interfere."

She pointed her wand at the ladle in the stew, and it magically filled two bowls, which promptly floated over to the counter where a pair of stools sat, waiting to be used. "I'm surprised it took him that long, really. What are you waiting for, Harry, open it!"

Harry grinned and pulled open the envelope, careful not to tear the parchment. He pulled out a thick letter and some sort of booklist. He flipped open the letter.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

HEADMASTER: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, Intl. Confederation of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

I must say, it's been quite a challenge for Professor Dumbledore to locate you. Your guardian concealed you well. I am very pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins September 1st. We await your owl no later than July 31st.

Yours Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Harry put the letter down, then looked up to see Daphne approaching with their dinner and two glasses of pumpkin juice. "Aunt Daph, it says they wanted our owl over two weeks ago."

"Don't worry, Harry. If they turn you down I might die of shock. Dumbledore is desperate to have you nearby, and know that you are safe."

"So should I send Yancy?" Harry asked. Yancy was the name of the eagle owl that Edmond Dressler had purchased shortly after the wedding. The clever creature had found its way all the way back to Daphne shortly after their arrival.

"No, we'll do better than that. We're going back to England in the morning Harry, if that's okay with you. We'll take a Portkey to Dressler Manor and Apparate to Hogwarts."

"Alright. I'm not looking forward to the Apparition, but I'd like to see the castle. Why are we going in person?" Harry asked as he blew on his scalding hot stew.

"Because I've got a few things to discuss with Dumbledore, and it would be nice to let them see you. You still alright with removing the Glamour?"

"Yes, it's for the best. I might try to hide it under my fringe though. I really don't care for being famous when it means I don't have a mother."

"I understand, Harry. Just be prepared for a lot of people not as mature as you," she said, gazing out the window, "not just children, either."

"I know," he said quietly. "Any chance you could do something about this stew?"

Daphne smacked her forehead. "Sorry Harry, here, I'll use a Cooling Charm."

She poked her wand and the steam ceased. Harry took a small spoonful and found it warm but no longer scalding. He ate slowly, as

he always did. He wasn't much like his father in that regard. Harry ate whatever was given to him and overall, didn't eat that much. Still, he was healthy and slim without being skinny, and she couldn't complain.

After dinner, Daphne gave him a quick peck on the forehead, ruffled his hair, and sent him off to bed. She knew he would be reading for several hours. Cleaning the kitchen quickly, she sat down and began to ponder how both she and Harry would adapt to life at Hogwarts.

She knew that Harry was quiet and shy, and might have some problems fitting in, and that his fame would give him unwarranted attention. Still, he would probably find a loyal group of intelligent friends sooner or later. He'd love the classes, and be at the top of most of them. Harry had been begging her to teach him magic for years. However, she wanted above all else for Harry to be an average eleven-year old wizard. She had allowed him to indulge in his interest in magical history, and a limited interest in magical creatures. She had also introduced him to many different types of spells and magic.

What she had allowed him to do was attempt to learn six of the most useful and simple spells that she knew. They included the Shield Charm, the most complicated, the Levitation Charm, very simple, the Disarming Charm, a bit more complicated but extremely useful, the Full-Body Bind, the Lighting Charm, a necessity (it was a wonder to her why they waited until second year), and finally, the Stunning Spell, a more complicated and useful spell. Using her wand, Harry had mastered the Lighting and Levitation Charms, made progress with the Disarming charm, and shown some progress with the Shield Charm and Stunning Spell. With his own wand, (which she planned to purchase after the trip to Hogwarts,) he'd no doubt be even better. If Harry knew at least four of those spells, she'd feel comfortable leaving him at Hogwarts.

As for herself, she'd been exploring several options. She'd write to Harry regularly, of course. She planned to spend Easter with him, but she'd reluctantly accepted an offer to stay the holidays in Australia with Edmond's favorite cousin, Alfred. She liked the man a great deal, and couldn't turn him down. Harry had been disappointed, but understanding. He knew what it was like to miss family. As for the

rest of her time, she hoped to be a full-time researcher at the local Magical Institute. For the time being, she planned to stay in Newfoundland. She loved the area and the community of Claw's Clan. Eventually, they might move back to Dressler Manor. But that was in the future.

"Harry! Wake up, we've got to go!"

Daphne pulled the sheets off her sleeping nephew and watched him curl into a ball, mumbling something like, "five more minutes" into his pillow.

"Harry, we're going to Hogwarts NOW! Get Up!" she cried, tossing a set of robes at him. He caught them and, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, put on his glasses before shooing his aunt out of the room. Dressing quickly, Harry hurried downstairs for a quick breakfast of bacon and eggs. If there was one meal that Daphne could make, it was breakfast.

After using the loo, he ran into the living room, where Daph had his racing broom out. When he frowned, she said, "It's a voice-activated Portkey. We used it to get here the first time." Harry nodded.

Daphne whispered, "*New Beginnings,*" and the broom glowed blue. Harry and Daphne each placed a hand on the broom handle, and Harry felt a hook behind his navel as the world disappeared in a blur of light and color.

They landed softly in the living room of Dressler Manor. There was a loud squeak, and two old house elves raced into the room to find a small house-elf cowering in fear at the new arrivals. Yonky and Floppy looked up with an expression of glee and amazement on their features.

"Mistress Daphne and...Master Harry? You is returned?" Floppy asked excitedly. "You has grown so big, Master Harry! You was just a little baby last time I sees you."

Harry glanced at Daphne, who was trying to stifle a laugh. "Floppy took care of you while I made provisions to leave. I guess she's happy to see you."

Yonky suddenly ran over and grabbed Daphne by the ankle. "Mistress Daphne has returned! Is you staying long?"

Daphne's face fell. "No, sorry Yonky. We're here for only a moment. You've done a great job with the house, though." It was true, the house was immaculate and spotless, as if it had never been abandoned.

The house-elf beamed at the praise, and asked, "Is I to be getting you anything?"

"No, thank you, Yonky. We'll see you again later today. Let's go Harry."

Harry followed his aunt out the front door, taking his first steps in his home country for almost ten years. Grabbing hold of his aunt's arm, he had the unusual feeling of being compacted through a rubber tube, and with a CRACK of displaced air, they were on their way to Hogwarts.

Chapter 3: The Return of Harry Potter

They reappeared on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, the wizarding village just outside the anti-apparition wards of Hogwarts. After Daphne showed Harry some of the highlights, including Zonko's Joke Shop, as reluctant as she may have been. She pointed out Madam Puddifoot's, naming it as a place for when he was a bit older, causing Harry to blush brightly and Daphne to grin widely. She also pointed out Honeyduke's Sweet Shop, which Harry was excited to visit. He was annoyed that it was only during third year that students could visit Hogmeade.

They stopped in the Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer, something Harry enjoyed greatly. He had carefully combed his hair down so his fringe covered his scar. However, Madam Rosmerta had seen a little too much of Harry's father and Daphne to be fooled.

"Well, bless my soul. *Daphne?* And...are you *Harry Potter?*" Harry nodded politely, taking another sip of butterbeer while Daphne grinned widely.

"Great to see you, Rosie. How's business?"

"Pretty good. School's starting soon, so it'll be better, especially on Hogsmeade Weekends. So what exactly is Mr. Potter, who looks identical to James, by the way, doing here? And you with him?"

"I've raised him since his parents died. We've been living out of the country, and Harry's starting school soon. We thought we'd pay a visit to Albus before the term starts."

"Well, this is quite a surprise," the curly-haired barmaid said, taking a seat beside them. Harry scooted over, but Rosmerta was focused only on Daphne. The two of them had had many conversations over the years, Rosmerta as a young barmaid, Dressler as an attentive Hogwarts student. More than often, the conversations had involved the constant drama between Lily Evans and James Potter. Daphne had given up hope by 5th year, and encouraged both Lily and James to look elsewhere, but Rosie had held fast to the belief that true love would prevail. And so it had, as the result was sitting uncomfortably next to the two old friends, sipping his butterbeer.

After draining another tankard each ("I'd forgotten how much I loved this stuff."), Daphne bid Rosmerta goodbye and she and Harry headed up the road to Hogwarts. Reaching the massive front doors, she waved her wand, and the wards recognized her as an Order member and the front door opened. She and Harry slipped into the deserted entrance hall.

She led Harry, who was gazing at the paintings and suits of armor in awe, into the main concourse. They then caught a changing stairs up to the landing where Dumbledore's office was. She spotted Filch, but intentionally avoided him, hoping to surprise Dumbledore.

She walked up to the Gargoyle and frowned, realizing she didn't know the password. Then she walked up, laid her hand on the gargoyle's snout, and said, "Frederick, I believe I have someone that Professor Dumbledore very much desires to meet." Harry gave her a questioning look, but she gave him a reassuring glance. The gargoyle moved to the side, recognizing her request. She took Harry by the hand and led him up the spiral staircase to an office she has visited rarely as a Hogwarts student and often as an Order member. In fact, the only time that she had been there as a student was when he parents had been murdered.

She heard voices coming from inside, then grinned at Harry and knocked several times on the door. "Come in," came a familiar voice from inside. She pushed the door open and stepped through, gesturing for Harry to stay back for a moment. Realizing what his aunt planned to do, Harry moved back.

Daphne confidently walked into full view, crossing her arms over her chest. "Hello Albus, it's been a while."

To say that the three occupants of the room were stunned would have been an understatement. Minerva's face turned white and her jaw dropped, her mouth moving but no sound coming out. Daphne noticed her hair was now entirely gray. Severus Snape, his hair as greasy as ever, looked like someone had hit him over the head with a club. Dumbledore, for once, was speechless. His eyebrows were all the way in his white hair, and his mouth was slightly agape.

There were a few moments of silence, before Minerva spluttered and then got out, “*Daphne? What are you doing here?*”

“Yes, Daphne. We *would* very much like to know why you are interrupting a staff meeting. We would want to know even more where your ward is,” Dumbledore said, recovering his composure.

Dressler said prissily, “Harry, come in if you would.”

Once again, the three were struck speechless as Harry nervously entered the office. Snape’s eyes narrowed in intense dislike, and she realized with a jolt that Harry’s resemblance of James would evoke a great deal of bitterness from the former Death Eater. Minerva looked like she was on the verge of breaking down, and Dumbledore looked...*proud*?

“Hello,” Harry said quietly.

“Hello, Harry. How are you doing?” Dumbledore asked, a tone of wonderment in his voice.

“Quite well, sir,” Harry replied quickly, his nervousness getting the better of him. Daphne beamed at him.

“That’s quite good. Harry, would you mind leaving us for a moment? I believe your...?”

“Aunt” Harry supplied.

“...aunt and I have something to discuss.” Dumbledore said kindly. “Perhaps-“

“Could someone show me to the library, sir?” Harry asked, his eyes lighting up. Daphne had told him about the massive library, and he was quite anxious to start browsing. It seemed that the response had shocked the three all over again. Once place you *never* found James was in the library...unless he was chasing after Lily, of course, who made it a point to be there.

"I'd be delighted, Harry. Dappy?" Dumbledore called. A young house-elf appeared with a CRACK, and looked up. "Yes, Master Dumbledore sir?"

"Please show young Harry to the library if you would, Dappy." The house-elf bowed, and Harry took his hand as the small green creature led Harry out of the office. As the door shut, Minerva was the first to speak.

"The boy looks so much like James, but he...he's not like him at all! What have you done with him, Daphne?" she asked, still flustered.

"Oh, only brought out his inner Lily," she replied innocently.

"While the boy does look extraordinarily like James, there is the small matter of why exactly this is the first we've seen of him in almost ten years, and why you were hiding in as remote a place as Newfoundland," Dumbledore said lightly, but with a serious tone in his voice. Daphne's scarred face hardened.

"I would think you knew *exactly* why, Albus. Because Harry was going to Lily's sister over my dead body," she replied coldly. She'd been anticipating this confrontation for years.

"My dear Daphne—"

"Stop, Albus," she said, her grey-green eyes burning with an inner fire she only felt when she was defending the boy she regarded as her son. "Those are some of the most awful human beings I've ever had the displeasure of meeting, and I knew *future Death Eaters*. You were *not* going to leave Harry to live with them. We both needed healing at that point. He gave me something to love, and I gave him a mother he was so unfairly robbed of."

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. Snape spoke up, venom in his voice. "Surely you might have left more than just a simple note on his mother's corpse. You did run off to part unknown with no warning or reason."

"I gave my reason in that note. 'I am taking Harry away from all of this,'" she quoted. "He was an infant. I took him away from the war,

away from the fanfare. And he's all the better for it. He's the most wonderful child I've ever known."

"How did you know what I planned to do, Daphne?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"I put two and two together. I know of your faith in blood magic. He only had one blood relative left."

"Ah, I see," Dumbledore said. "So, is there anything else I should know?"

"Well, yes. I believe I've figured out a plausible explanation for the events of Halloween."

"Enlighten us, if you would, Daphne," Minerva prompted. "We all would like to know."

"Voldemort killed Lily when she was defending her child. She was a powerful enough witch and loved Harry enough, that when she sacrificed her life, her magic created a protection that, because it was so soon after her death, deflected the Killing Curse cast at Harry. The scar is the only relic of the curse. Voldemort was beaten by Old Magic."

The office was quiet for a bit. Then Dumbledore spoke. "That is what I believe, as well. Exactly what I believe occurred."

Daphne nodded. "Now, I'm sure you'd like to know about Harry. Ask away."

Minerva spoke up. "What kind of boy is he? What are his interests?"

Daphne launched into an explanation of her favorite part of Harry's personality. "He's very studious and extremely intelligent. He's a quick learner and always motivated to learn more. He loves to read. He likes to fly, but he's never played Quidditch, it isn't popular up in Canada. He loves Magical History, that's the only area of magic that I've let him study extensively."

"Interesting," Minerva remarked. "He sounds so much like a young Lily. But does that mean he's ahead of the rest of his classmates. You were probably a lot more lenient than most of the pureblood families. How many spells does he know, twenty? Thirty? I understand you may have thought it necessary, but—"

"On the contrary, I've made every effort to prevent Harry from getting too far ahead. Most of his reading that isn't related to Magical History, most of which isn't covered by the curriculum for early Hogwarts students if I remember correctly, is Muggle literature. He knows six spells, and can perform four of them."

"Which spells?" Snape snapped.

"He can perform the Lighting, Levitation, Fully-Body Bind, and Disarming Charms. He's working on the Stunning Spell and Shielding Charm. I haven't been teaching him the Severing Curse, Snape," she snapped back.

"So he knows a first year spell, a trio of second year spells, and a pair of fourth year spells. He'll *only* be able to overpower every student in the first two years at Hogwarts. And he doesn't even have his own wand yet. *Brilliant* Daphne. Perfect Potter will be able to boss around—"

"*How dare you?*" Daphne hissed, resisting the urge to slap him. "Harry is a shy child, he wouldn't antagonize *anyone* who didn't deserve it. Even then, I doubt he'd bully someone. He's powerful, even for a wizard of his age, but he's no threat to anyone. It takes quite a bit to get him riled."

"Based on his parentage, I find that hard to believe," Snape muttered under his breath.

"Severus—" Dumbledore warned.

Taking the conversation in a different direction, Minerva asked, "What house do you see him in?"

Daphne allowed herself a small smile. "Before you get excited Minerva, I'd be stunned if he made it into Gryffindor. He's brave, but

that's not his primary character, it only emerges under extreme stress. He isn't nearly as impulsive as James or Lily. I say Ravenclaw would be the best fit for him. However," she said, "I wouldn't be shocked in the least if he took up residence in the dungeons." She grinned at the shocked responses she got. *Somehow, their surprise.*

McGonagall spluttered. "Surely with *two* parents in Gryffindor—"

"And one, the most important, in Ravenclaw, with a Slytherin for a husband. Besides, Lily always reminded of a Ravenclaw or Slytherin more than a Gryffindor."

There was silence for a moment, before Snape hissed, "*I will never stand to have a Potter dirty the name of the great Slytherin House.*"

Daphne just smiled at him. She was enjoying this.

"Well, I believe that's all we really have to discuss," she said.

"Very well, Daphne," Dumbledore said. "Are you to be staying here or in Hogmeade?"

"No," Daphne said, mindful of Dumbledore's attempt to sink his claws into her ward. "I plan for us to take a trip to Diagon Alley and then return home for the remainder of the summer."

"Very well. I trust you know where to find your ward."

"Indeed. Goodbye Professors." Daphne spun on her heel and walked out of the office. She heard a muffled, "*Bloody hell!*" that she thought came from Minerva. She was sorry to shatter their illusions, but better now than later. She didn't want them to be stunned during the Sorting and make Harry feel uncomfortable.

Harry and Daphne headed back down to the Three Broomsticks, greeting Rosmerta as they did. They each grabbed a pinch of floo powder (Rosmerta charged it to the house), and Daphne called out a place she hadn't visited in over ten years.

"Diagon Alley!"

She was spat out of the fireplace and skidded to a halt. Her nephew wasn't so grateful. Thankfully, he got the right fireplace, but he ended up flying ass over teakettle and making a head first dive into a table. Daphne wasn't sure how he'd managed that, but could help laughing as she ran over to help him up. Harry scowled. "I *hate* floo travel." Daphne laughed again, then pulled him to his feet. As Tom, the bartender ran over to see if he was alright, his eyes locked on Harry's forehead, and Daphne silently cursed.

"*Could it be...Harry Potter?*" Tom asked in an awed voice. Harry suddenly looked dejected and nervous. Daphne nodded, and ran over to get Harry out, but far too many people had already heard them.

"Mr. Potter, welcome back, my boy, welcome back," a tall wizard said, grasping Harry's hands with shaking arms. Harry just stared back at him, his eyes wide.

Another wizard came out of the group, one she recognized. "Dedalus Diggle, Mr. Potter, it is so nice to see you for the first time."

"Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter. So nice to finally meet you."

"Mr. Potter—"

"That's enough," Daphne snapped. Several people gasped, either at her scar or in recognition. "The boy is eleven bleeding years old, and you are practically smothering him. C'mon Harry, let's go." Harry ran over to her, and she put a hand on him to try and quell his shaking, then she took his hand and guided him out of the crowded pub. The crowd followed them with their gaze, trying to catch a glimpse of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Once they were outside, Daphne pulled Harry into an embrace. "Are you okay? I'm sorry about that, they don't understand."

"I'm fine," Harry said, "just rattled. Is this what it's going to be like at Hogwarts, too?"

"Well, maybe at first. But if you behave like yourself, I expect people will leave you alone. You don't call attention to yourself, you know."

"Good. So where first?"

"Gringotts. Then how about the bookstore? You'll love Flourish and Botts." Harry nodded, and they set off for the bank.

They arrived outside the massive white building and went inside. Harry was quite interested to get a glimpse of a goblin. He'd heard plenty about them and knew they were quite condescending to wizards who treated them with disdain. They walked up to the first empty station, where a goblin appeared to be counting numbers.

"145 galleons and 738 galleons..." the Goblin said.

"883 galleons," Harry supplied. The Goblin looked down at him curiously, then continued.

"432 galleons, 68 galleons, 49 galleons..." the goblin said, looking down at the eleven-year old expectantly.

"549 galleons," Harry responded quickly. The goblin nodded, looking pleased.

"Thank you, Mr..."

"Potter," Harry said. "Harry Potter." The goblin smiled, a kind of grin that fully displayed its yellow teeth. You normally didn't want a goblin looking at you like that, but somehow Harry knew the goblin was pleased, not anticipating vengeance. Daphne was watching him proudly.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. It's been quite a while since I last had a chance to manage your vault. I am Griphook, just as it so happens the Keeper of the Potter Vaults."

As Daphne silently thanked Merlin for their luck, Harry responded politely, "It is good to meet you, Master Griphook. I would like to make a withdrawal, if it is not a problem."

Griphook was obviously impressed by the young wizard, and graciously indicated the direction of the carts. "And you, Mrs...?"

"Dressler. Daphne Dressler. I would also like to make a withdrawal, as well as transfer some money from my account to the Claw's Clan Bank, one of your affiliates." The goblin nodded. Mr. Potter, Mrs. Dressler, do you have your keys?"

"I do. I'm afraid Harry does not," Daphne said, annoyed. She hoped that the goblin would not take this badly.

"Well, Mr. Potter's situation is understandable. If he is willing to provide some blood, we will be able to open his vault." Harry looked nervous, and glanced at his guardian.

"Don't worry Harry. All you need to do it touch the vault door and be willing to surrender a drop or two." Harry nodded.

They boarded the cart, and descended into the tunnels of Gringotts. Harry found the cart ride to be much like flying on a broom, though Daphne didn't seem to be enjoying it quite as much. They stopped about two minutes after leaving.

"Vault 514," Griphook called. Daphne got out of the cart and walked to the door, waving off the goblin. "I'd like to see if this still works."

"The End of Days," she said quietly, but clearly. There was the sound of whirring gears and motors, and the door opened. Daphne smiled, while Griphook looked impressed.

Harry jumped off the cart and walked into the vault. Mountains of galleons, sickles, and knuts were piled around the vault, along with countless treasures that appeared to be family heirlooms. Harry wasn't surprised; the Dresslers were a very wealthy pureblood family. After Daphne gathered a bag full of coins, she walked over the treasures and removed several pieces of jewelry, included a jeweled tiara. Harry saw tears in her eyes as she held the priceless and beautiful artifact up to the light, the deep emeralds green shining through the chamber. She gathered it into a bundle, and shrank it so that it fit in her bag.

"Daph?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Sorry, Harry. I wore this on my wedding day. Edmond adored it," she said by way of explanation. Harry nodded; he knew that Daphne had never gotten over losing her husband so soon into their marriage. He also knew that she had sworn to remain unattached. She still wore her diamond and sapphire wedding ring, and was quite short with any men that tried to get her attention.

They reboarded the cart, and Harry asked a question that had been bugging him. "Aunt Daph, how wealthy were my parents?" Harry didn't want to sound arrogant or anything, he was just interested.

"Quite wealthy, Harry," she said, staring off into the distance, as she did often when she talked of Lily and James. "The Potter are an old pureblood family, and the Evans were fairly wealthy for Muggles. Petunia, your real aunt, distanced herself from the family because of her jealousy of Lily's abilities and marriage, and so she got much less from the wills when they were killed in a car crash. It happened about a year after Lily and James married."

Harry nodded. "Just interested."

"Well, even if your parents had been poor as paupers, I would have given you whatever you needed. I love you, Harry, and you are all I have."

Harry smiled at her. "I love you too, Daph."

They arrived at Harry's vault. "Vault 687," Griphook announced. "Over here, Mr. Potter. Please place your right hand on this spot," he said, indicating a panel on the left side of the vault door. "If you are a Potter. If you aren't, you will be incinerated." Harry gulped.

Placing his hand where Griphook instructed him to, Harry felt an odd sucking sensation, and saw a red stain appear beneath his hand, presumably his blood. The blood disappeared into the door, and with a whir of gears and motors, the vault door swung open.

Harry stepped in, and was pleasantly surprised to see several large piles of wizard coins. Quickly gathering as much as he could, he walked back over to where his guardian and Daphne were standing.

"Keep in mind, Harry, that this is only your trust vault, which refills on an annual basis. The Potter Family Vault is much larger, correct Griphook?"

The goblin nodded. "The Potter Family Vault is one of the larger vaults at Gringotts. Mr. Potter will have full access when he comes of age."

They returned to the lobby, and Daphne went into a private room to have a discussion with one of the other goblins, while Harry looked around. He spotted a giant man, the largest he'd ever seen, coming out of the other tunnels, tucking a small package into his massive overcoat. Harry caught a flash of red from the poorly wrapped package, but thought nothing else of it.

Suddenly, the man stopped, his small black eyes locking onto Harry. Not onto his scar, which was covered by his fringe, but onto his jet-black hair and green eyes. "'Arry?" he asked, as if unwilling to believe it was true.

"Sir?" Harry asked politely. The giant man stared at him. "Got ter be. Just like 'is dad, but 'is mum's eyes," the giant muttered under his breath. "Harry Potter?" he asked hopefully. Taking a nervous glance around, Harry nodded.

"I haven't seen yeh since yeh wer a baby, a couple o' months after yeh wer born," he said, with tears glistening in his eyes. "I held ya that day. Where have you been all these years?"

"With me, Rubeus," Daphne said, as she emerged from the office.

'Rubeus's eyes widened in surprise. "*Daphne? So yeh did raise 'im.*"

"Indeed I did, Hagrid. It is nice to see you again."

"Lily an' James would been so proud of the job you've done," he gushed. Harry blushed at the inherent praise, while Daphne smiled.

"It's the least I could have done for my best friend's son."

"Of course," Rubeus Hagrid said. "Time I get goin'. Dumbledore trusted me wit' getting sommat. Great man, Dumbledore." Daphne bowed her head briefly, and Hagrid nodded, and left.

"Daph, who was that?" Harry asked. The man seemed to know him quite well, even claiming to have held him as an infant.

"That was Rubeus Hagrid, the Groundskeeper at Hogwarts. He's a great bloke, a very interesting character. Loves magical creatures, especially dangerous ones, and he's loyal to a fault. Brave to a fault too, a true Gryffindor if there ever was one. Dumbledore trusts him. He was probably retrieving something from the vaults for him."

"Really? I saw what he had gotten. Looked like some kind of small package. I saw what looked like red stone."

"Interesting," Daphne said, deep in thought. "You are very observant, Harry. That's something Lily was known for." Again, she said this staring off into the distance. Harry was used to it by now. He understood that while it wasn't his fault, talking about Lily and James, especially Lily, while staring into the same green eyes she had was extremely uncomfortable for his aunt. Harry respected this, and never took offense.

They exited the bank, their money bags much heavier than when they had entered, and walked back on the cobblestone street of Diagon Alley. "So, the bookstore now?" Harry asked. Daphne nodded, and they set off.

They arrived at Flourish and Botts in a few minutes, and Harry briskly walked inside. The building have obviously been enlarged by magic, because the interior was much larger than the exterior indicated. Shelf after shelf of books were visible, and Harry's green eyes lit up. "Let's get the school books first, Harry," Daphne advised. Then you can have some time to get some other books. They made their way over to the 'Hogwarts' section, and found the books on the list labeled under 'First Year.' Harry grabbed *The Standard Book of Spells: Grade 1, Magical Theory, A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration, One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, Magical Drafts and Potions, Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, and The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self Protection*. He already had a copy of *A History of Magic*,

one that he had covered in his own notes and comments from other sources he had read. After handing his schoolbooks off to his aunt, he began searching for some more reading material. Harry had decided he wanted to search for books that would give him background material on the world he was entering.

He spotted a bushy-haired girl eagerly flipping through the pages of a book called, *Hogwarts: A History*, and decided it sounded like a good place to start. He spotted one remaining copy, and pulled it off the shelf, tucking it under his arm. He then saw a book called *Quidditch Through the Ages*, and thought it would be best if he learned about the popular wizard sport. He also found three other books, *Famous Witches and Wizards of the Past Five Hundred Years*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, and *Useful Charms and Spells*. Making his way over to his aunt, he showed her his selections. She smiled when she saw the Quidditch book.

After they finished their purchases, they decided to buy robes. Entering Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, they headed over to start browsing. Harry spotted a boy his age with sandy-brown hair who was arguing with his mother in a heavy Irish accent. Daphne stopped and smiled at the boy's mother, who stared back at her in confusion, then Harry saw recognition flash in her eyes.

"It's good to see you again, Ellie," Daphne said, extending her hand. Elisha Finnegan took it.

"My, my, Daphne O'Connor. It's sure been a long time."

"It certainly has. I married Edmond," she said sadly.

The woman slapped her forehead. "Merlin, I forgot. How rude of me. I was so sorry to hear of your loss. Myself, I met a Muggle, Ian Finnegan, and it was love at first sight. This is Seamus," she said. "He's starting his first year at Hogwarts."

"Mine too. This is Harry, Lily and James's son."

"You raised Harry Potter? Merlin, they said he'd gone into hiding, but never specified who or where..."

"Indeed," Daphne said quickly, indicating the conversation was not going any further in *that* direction.

Seamus and Harry exchanged nervous greetings, and Harry saw Seamus's eyes flick to his fringe-covered forehead. With a sigh, Harry brushed his hair aside to give the boy a glimpse of his scar. His eyes widened, then he realized he was staring and nodded, giving Harry an apologetic look.

The Finnegans left. Harry was quickly fitted for his robes by one of Madam Malkin's assistants. They left the shop still making good time, and Harry checked his list.

"Let's get your wand now, Harry. To Olivander's we go."

Harry and Daphne walked to the wand store, a small, shabby-looking wooden building with a wand lying on a purple pillow in the windowsill, the sign above it reading, *Olivander's: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC*. Harry and Daphne walked inside and found it empty. Harry gave his guardian a questioning look, but she just smiled and looked around expectantly. Sure enough, Olivander appeared, clinging onto a tall ladder that slid around the shelves of wands on a track, much like one that would be found in an old library. He was a bald man with shining silver eyes.

"Mr. Potter. I wondered when I'd be meeting you," he said by way of greeting. "And Mrs. Dressler."

"10 ¼ inches, dark mahogany, a tail feather from a rare blue phoenix, very precise and balanced," Daphne and Olivander said simultaneously. Olivander smiled. "Good to see you remember as well as I."

"Now, Mr. Potter. I remember your parents as well. Your father's wand: 11 inches, pliable, single unicorn tail hair, powerful and good for Transfiguration. The resemblance is nearly perfect but for your mother's eyes; her wand: 10 ¼ inches, swishy, made of willow, a dragon-heartstring, excellent for charm work."

"The wand chooses the wizard, Mr. Potter. Now, if you will." A tape measure flew up and began to take Harry's measurements, including the width between his eyes and the size of his forehead.

Olivander disappeared again on his ladder. He returned later with a large pile of boxes.

"12 inches, unicorn hair, maple. Give it a wave," he said, handing the wand to Harry. It felt cold in his fingertips. Olivander knew it was wrong before he even had a chance to use it, and snatched it away.

"9 inches, dragon heartstring, willow, very stiff." Harry took the wand and waved it, causing a tank of water to explode. Olivander took the wand back. "I think not."

And so it went. Harry tried in excess of twenty wands, to no avail. But it didn't discourage the shop owner, instead, Harry was certain he was close to wetting himself from excitement. He came out the back again, cradling a beaten looking grey box as if it were the crown jewels. "I wonder, I wonder. Try this, Mr. Potter."

Harry took the wand, and felt warmth spread through his fingertips. He waved the wand in an arc, and the store lit up with red and gold, silver and green, and bronze and blue sparks. A soft, beautiful sound was heard. Harry knew what it was: Phoenix song.

"Ah, yes. Curious. *Very curious indeed.* It makes sense, however."

"Excuse me, sir. But what is curious about my choice of wand."

"Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple. Yes, it is indeed curious that this would be your wand when it's brother, why, it's brother, *gave you that scar.*" Harry stared at him, hard.

"*Voldemort's* wand is a brother to mine?" he said, incredulously. He glanced over at Daphne, who was deep in thought.

"Indeed, Mr. Potter. This is a powerful wand, as was the one that belonged to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Yew, thirteen and a half inches. Very powerful, more powerful than even yours. It will be quite *interesting* if your wand are ever to meet."

Harry was getting nervous, and Daphne knew it. She thanked the man and Harry paid seven galleons for his wand, before hurrying out of the shop. After assuring Daphne that he was fine, and that he understood that his wand didn't mean he had anything to do with Voldemort, they set off to the Apothecary. He purchased scales and a pewter cauldron, as well as necessary first year potions ingredients. Daphne mentioned that Potions was one of Lily's fortés, and that it was a matter of concentration and accuracy. Daphne was privately confident that Harry would be quite good at it.

Next, Daphne said that she would buy Harry an owl. They entered Eeylop's Owl Emporium and began looking over the various breeds and species. They looked at eagle owls, screech owls, and barns owls, but Harry didn't see any he really liked. Daphne said he could use Yancy, but Harry wasn't listening, as his gaze had been captured by a beautiful snowy owl with shining amber eyes. Daphne nodded her approval of the gorgeous creature, and they bought the owl.

Harry named her Hedwig, after a famous 14th century charms wizard. He purchased a cage and owl treats for his new familiar, and they set off back to the Leaky Cauldron. As they passed by Quality Quidditch Supplies, Harry's eye was drawn to a display in the window. He stepped closer to the Nimbus 2000, the newest model of broom, and was impressed by the specifications; it was much better than Daphne's Cleansweep. Still, first years couldn't have their own brooms, so there was no point in asking. Daphne walked over to him, and let out a small chuckle.

"I should have known that it would be long until Quidditch captured you. You've got in it in your blood, after all, and you love to fly."

Harry turned and looked at her questioningly. "James was a Chaser for most of his career at Hogwarts, save one year he was a Seeker. He was damned good too, and a bit cocky, if I do say so myself. Lily refused to date him until he deflated his head a bit." Harry laughed at the mental image. "I'll tell you what. I won't deny James to have a little claim over you. *If* you can make the House team at any time, I'll buy you the newest model broom."

Harry smiled. "Sound good, though it probably won't be this year."

They laughed, then returned to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry's second floo trip wasn't much better than the first, as he hurtled headfirst out of the fireplace, this time crashing into a couch. Daphne laughed as she saw her nephew try to disentangle himself from the couch. "Well, Harry, we seem to have found something you aren't very good at."

Harry scowled at her. The house-elves came in and greeted them, and Harry and Daphne decided they might as well stay the night. Floppy, Yonky, and their daughter, Yappy, were thrilled. After a delicious dinner ten years in the making, Harry and Daphne went to sleep, Harry reading his copy of *Hogwarts: A History* until he fell asleep, dreaming of a day where he was older and gazing up at the majestic castle.

Harry awoke the next day and got dressed. After a quick shower, he ran down the spiral staircase to the ground floor and ran into the kitchen, where Daphne was sitting in a chair, scowling at something. The house-elves were busily running about, preparing breakfast with wide grins on their faces. They obviously hadn't done this for a while.

Harry approached his aunt, and looked over her shoulder to see what she was scowling at. "Skeeter cow," she muttered under her breath. "Harry, it's garbage, you don't need to read it."

Harry smiled. "I gather Skeeter is a journalist."

"Yes, a nosy, nasty, vindictive, journalist for the Prophet. That's why she makes thousands of galleons. People read the garbage she writes."

"Know thy enemy," Harry quoted, and took the newspaper from Daphne. He stared at the front page, which had an image of him shrinking away from Doris Crockford, and underneath a large banner headline.

Boy-Who-Lived Returns to England

By Rita Skeeter

On Halloween Night, 1981, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named met his end at the hands of an infant boy, Harry Potter. That same day, the only known survivor of the Killing Curse disappeared from the wizarding world, and for nearly ten years, the only information the wizarding world had about it's savior was that he was 'in hiding.' Why the Boy-Who-Lived would need to be in hiding so long after the last of You-Know-Who's followers were rounded up was unknown.

Yesterday, August 16th, Harry Potter made his first appearance in public in the Leaky Cauldron. Mr. Potter was mobbed by the patrons of the establishment, including your own Daily Prophet Correspondent. The Boy-Who-Lived appeared to shy away from the attention, and the fear in his wide green eyes was evident from across the room. He fled the scene soon after with his guardian. The identity of the Boy-Who-Lived's guardian is interesting in and of itself.

Defending the eleven year old's space and privacy was none other than Daphne Dressler, the famed ex-Auror. Dressler, whose husband Edmond was killed during the war, was known as being deadly with a wand and one of the best the Ministry had ever employed. One of her trainers said that she, "was always aware of her surroundings, maintained a level head at all times, and was the best duelist she had ever met." Dressler is best known for the capture of Thomas Mulciber and Addison Jugson, two of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's Death Eaters. It is also rumored that Dressler killed Evan Rosier, one of You-Know-Who's Inner Circle.

But as great an Auror and duelist she may have been, the question is: What is this dangerous woman doing with the savior of the wizarding world's care in her hands? Is she fit to raise a child, with such a violent past? Has she passed on her combat tactics to an eleven year old, turning him into a weapon at the tender age of eleven? One must wonder what Albus Dumbledore was thinking when he allowed this.

A noted St. Mungo's psychologist offered his opinion. "I believe that Dressler may have taken Mr. Potter without the knowledge of Albus Dumbledore. She was quite close to the boy's mother, if memory serves me. She may have been hurting from the loss of her husband, and taken the boy as a substitute."

This Daily Prophet reporter again wonders why Albus Dumbledore has allowed a potentially unbalanced and very dangerous woman to take care of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry put the paper down. “Well, it could be worse. She did praise your fighting skills quite a bit. Just because she doesn’t have a clue what you are like when you aren’t fighting doesn’t mean that you should take this seriously. Of course, Skeeter’s type always find something wrong, but cheer up. At least she didn’t mention your scars.”

Daphne laughed. “You amaze me sometimes, do you know that? How many eleven year olds could read that and say what you just said?”

“*Not many,*” Harry mumbled, blushing at the praise.

Later that day, they portkeyed back to Claw’s Clan. It had certainly been an eventful day.

Chapter 4: Sorted Affairs

As Harry lay in bed, *Hogwarts: A History* lying open across his chest, his thoughts wandered back to a conversation he had had earlier that day:

“Aunt Daph,” Harry said, “What can you tell me about the Houses?”

Daphne, who had been reading a novel by one of her favorite wizard writers, Thomas Goldstein, put the book down and looked over at her nephew.

“Well, there are four of them. Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, Slytherin, and Ravenclaw. I’m sure you know that already. Hufflepuffs are known for loyalty, Slytherins for cunning and resourcefulness, Ravenclaws for intelligence, and Gryffindors for bravery. Now, I want you to keep in mind that these are generalizations. People are placed in Houses because of family history, bloodlines, even sometime because they desire a certain House over another.

“You are going to meet people that say certain houses are better or worse. You are going to meet Gryffindors who think all of the Slytherins are pureblood supremacists who support the Dark Arts. While it is true that many of Voldemort’s Death Eaters were Slytherins, remember that the Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour, was a Slytherin. My husband, Edmond, who opposed the Dark Arts in all forms, was a Slytherin. Don’t believe what uneducated school children tell you. Not all Gryffindors are light wizards, or even brave. Hufflepuffs are not all weak-minded and cowardly, as you’ll hear far too many people say. Ravenclaws are not all brains.

“What I’m telling you, Harry, is that you need to keep an open mind. Just because your parents were both Gryffindors doesn’t mean you will be. I couldn’t care less which House you are sorted into. As long as you learn and grow, and become the wizard that I know you can be, I couldn’t be happier. Don’t feel pressured to go into one house or another, and don’t feel pressure to do things that a person your age shouldn’t be expected to do. Just because people expect certain things doesn’t mean they are always right about those things. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Aunt Daph. How are we sorted, anyway? There isn't any information in the book about it."

Daphne smiled. Even if I wanted to tell you, I couldn't. A charm is placed upon every sorted student that prevents them from discussing it with anyone who hasn't been sorted. I assure you that you will have no problems. Remember, Hogwarts accepts everyone. Do you think they could make you do anything that the least powerful wizard couldn't do? Or the most inexperienced Muggleborn?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "Is it really that easy?"

Daphne just smiled. "You'll find out."

And that had been that. Harry was now anxiously awaiting the morning trip to King's Cross to catch the Hogwarts Express. He understood why Daphne had said what she said about the houses. She knew him well, and knew that he tended to push himself when given any kind of pressure. He also didn't want to let her down, not when she had given him so much, saving him from these horrible Muggle relatives. She had put his mind at ease with her talk though.

He loved her more than anyone else in the world. He simply couldn't imagine a life without her. He knew that it was going to be difficult, separated by an ocean, but hoped that he'd be happy and be able to exchange letters. He knew he was too dependent on her, anyway. He need to learn to be independent, and this was a way to start.

Harry placed his book back on the nightstand, and turned off the light.

"Up! UP! GET UP!" Daphne yelled. Harry let out a cry and almost fell out of bed. He noted absently that his scar was hurting. He remembered a fuzzy dream, but nothing specific. He jumped out of bed, still tangled in the bed sheets, as Daphne threw open the curtains. Bright light streamed into the room, blinding Harry. He found his glasses being roughly shoved into his hand. When he put them on, he saw his aunt running around, checking to see if Harry had forgotten anything.

He checked his watch and swore when he saw it was 9:31. They had just an hour and a half to eat, portkey to Dressler Manor, and apparate to King's Cross to catch the Hogwarts Express at eleven.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I overslept," Daphne said as she left the room. Harry dressed in a jumper and jeans and stuffed his books into his trunk. Stuffing his wand in his pocket, he levitated the trunk and floated it downstairs, while carrying Hedwig's cage in his hand. The house-elves, to their credit, had not overslept, and breakfast was waiting on the table for them. After practically inhaling some bacon and eggs, Harry drained his glass of pumpkin juice and joined Daphne in the living room. She activated the portkey, and Harry grabbed onto his trunk and Hedwig's cage.

They were unceremoniously dumped into Dressler Manor, and after a quick greeting to the House-elves, Daphne grabbed Harry's arm and apparated him to the apparition point outside King's Cross station. They hurried into the building and checked the time: 10:45. Finding a trolley, they loaded Harry's things onto it and set off for Platform 9 3/4. They arrived at the place between platforms 9 and 10, and Harry gave Daphne a questioning glance. She smiled, and pointed at one of the brick columns. "That's a magical barrier. Just run at it and believe you'll make it through."

Following his aunts advice, Harry took the barrier at a sprint. The second he should have hit the brick, he felt a wash of magical energy and suddenly found himself on another platform. On the tracks in front of him was a majestic steam engine, gold lettering reading, *The Hogwarts Express*. As he and Daphne walked over, Harry spotted a large concentration of redheads. He caught the names 'Ron,' 'Percy,' and 'Ginny.' Daphne spotted them as well, and apparently recognized them. She called over to a short, plump woman named Molly.

"Who is that?" she asked, "Daphne?"

Daphne nodded. "Good to see you again, Molly. Have any new ones since then?"

"Oh no. I think seven is quite enough. Ron's starting Hogwarts this year," she said, gesturing proudly at the tall, gangly, freckled

redhead, who turned bright red. Harry looked over the other members of the family.

They seemed to all be dressed in worn clothing, indicating they probably weren't all that wealthy. A pair of identical twins, short and stocky, stood off the left, talking the a black boy with dreadlocks, who seemed to be holding the lid down on some sort of box.

The only girl was short with slightly darker red hair and freckles, along with her mother's brown eyes, and appeared to be very unhappy that her brothers were leaving. She saw Harry staring and looked back at him curiously, as if trying to place him from somewhere.

Harry's gaze shifted to a pompous looking redhead with wire-frame glasses, who was talking to a blond-haired girl. Harry guessed at least two children had graduated from Hogwarts already.

Daphne was having an animated conversation with Molly Weasley, as Harry now knew she was called, and Harry glanced at the clock to see they had seven minutes. Harry dragged his trunk towards the cargo compartment, but wasn't strong enough to lift it. Glancing around to look for witnesses, Harry subtly cast a Levitation charm on the trunk and managed to wrangle it into the compartment. He spotted the same bushy-haired girl he'd seen in the bookstore cast a disapproving glance at him. She'd obviously seen him perform magic.

Harry made his way over to Daphne, drawing Mrs. Weasley's attention. "Who is this, Daphne?" she asked. Harry shifted uncomfortably. He got even more nervous when he saw Mrs. Weasley's face light up in recognition. He looked all too much like his father; it was impossible to disguise his identity from anyone who had known his dad.

"That's my nephew, Harry," Daphne said smoothly. She smiled at Molly, but Harry saw that her eyes were pleading. Suddenly Molly nodded, and Harry knew she had understood. Perhaps being the mother of seven wizarding children made her much sharper in interpreting facial expressions.

As the minutes counted down, Daphne pulled Harry aside into the shadows. She smiled sadly at him, and Harry saw unshed tears

glistening in her eyes. “I love you, Harry. Stay as safe as you can, and for Merlin’s sake, have fun. Don’t worry about me, this had to happen sooner or later. We both have gotten a little too comfortable living together. This will be good for both of us. Oh, Lily and James would have been so *proud!*” she gushed, her normally carefully constructed façade collapsing. She pulled Harry into a fierce embrace, and gave him a kiss on the forehead. Harry smiled at her and boarded the train. He found an empty compartment near the front of the train. As he sat down, he heard a conversation.

“First time’s always the hardest, Daphne. His parents would have been proud of both of you.”

“I know, Molly. He’s just everything I have. I love him so much and it’s hard to let him go.”

“He seems like a good boy. He’ll write often, I’m sure.”

“I know. But that doesn’t make it any easier.”

Harry felt warmth spread through his body as he heard how much Daphne cared about him. His spirits high, he pulled out his copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Somehow, besides a visit from the food cart witch, Harry was able to read, uninterrupted for the duration of the trip. He saw people walk by, including a blond boy followed by a pair of boulder-like bodyguards. Harry guessed he was a pureblood from the way he carried himself.

The train pulled into Hogsmeade station, and the students debarked. Harry had gone for his trunk, but overhead another student telling a first year that their luggage would be taken up to the castle. He wandered over onto the platform, then spotted Hagrid.

“First years over ‘ere!” he called. His black eyes lit up when he spotted Harry. “Arry! Good ter se ya. Alright, First Years, follow me.”

While the rest of the school appeared to be boarding horseless carriages, the First Years walked down to the lakeshore, where dozens of small boats were waiting. They loaded into the boats, Harry taking the one where he saw the familiar bushy-haired girl. She

looked over at him, her brown eyes full of curiosity. “Have I seen you before today?” she asked. Harry nodded.

“In Flourish and Botts. You gave me the inspiration to buy *Hogwarts: A History*. ”

“It’s a great reference, isn’t it,” the girl said, as the boats pushed off, “I’m muggleborn, so I need as much information as I could use. We couldn’t figure out where to get all my school supplies for a long time, so we wrote the school, and they told us how to get into Diagon Alley.”

Harry nodded. “I was raised out of the country, with my aunt, so I didn’t know that much about wizarding Britain either.”

“Your aunt? What about your parents?” the girl asked. Harry thanked Merlin he was talking to a Muggleborn, who wouldn’t have heard his story.

“They died when I was one. Vol-You-Know-Who killed them,” Harry said sadly.

The girl’s eyes suddenly lit up, and Harry knew he’d been found out. “You’re Harry Potter, aren’t you? I’m Hermione Granger,” she said slowly.

Harry nodded. “How did you know?” he asked.

“Well, the dates fit, and so did your age. You also look like the picture I saw of your father in *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*. Did your aunt really raise you out of the country?”

“She’s not really my aunt. Her name is Daphne Dressler, and she was my mum’s best friend.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up once more. “Daphne Dressler? Wasn’t she one of the Ministry’s top Aurors?”

“Yeah...” Harry said, trailing off as they caught sight of Hogwarts. It was certainly more majestic from this angle and at night than it was before.

Hermione gasped beside him. “*That’s Hogwarts?*” she breathed. Harry nodded.

The boats landed at an underground dock, and the students piled off of them. A smallish, round boy cried out in glee when he found his toad. “That’s Neville Longbottom,” Hermione said, looking in his direction. “I helped him look for Trevor on the train.” Harry frowned. *Longbottom?* He was certain he had heard that name before.

The First Years proceeded up into an antechamber, where Professor McGonagall was waiting for them. The woman was dressed in green robes and had a pointed witch’s hat on. “You will wait here to be Sorted into your Houses. I suggest you use this time to smarten up a bit before the Sorting,” she said.

Harry uselessly tried to get his hair to lie flat, but it was a losing battle. “*I can never get it flat,*” he growled. To his surprise, McGonagall laughed. “Neither could your father.”

She left and the First Years began discussing what the Sorting might entail. Ron Weasley was going on about fighting a troll, but Harry knew that unless Filch wanted to be scraping eleven-year corpses off the floor and Dumbledore didn’t mind writing to furious parents, that seemed unlikely. Hermione was nervous, repeating spells she’d learned under her breath. Out of annoyance more than anything else, Harry put a hand on her shoulder. “Granger, relax. Think about it. Hogwarts doesn’t turn away students, and there are Muggleborns that are both less talented and less experienced than you. What are the odds you’ll be asked to do something requiring the *Alohamora* Charm?”

Hermione looked up at him, surprise on her face. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you are too nervous. Don’t worry about it. Just relax. You seem quite bright from what I can tell. You’ll probably be at the top of your class.” Hermione looked at him strangely, then turned red. Harry abruptly realized she might have been known as a know-it-all or something at Muggle school. Harry had been called that before, but he’d also had three loyal know-it-all friends to back him up. He

realized abruptly how much his missed Tanner, Trish, and Connor, and hoped they weren't mad at him.

The doors opened, the First Years were led into the Great Hall. Hermione started telling a pair of Indian girls about the ceiling, and how it was charmed to reflect the night sky. Indeed, when Harry glanced up, he saw stars and the moon, with the ceiling only faintly visible through the night sky. Candles were floating around the room, and Harry noticed five tables, one for each house, and another for the unsorted First Years.

Harry glanced up at a stool on which sat a patched, frayed, hat. He wondered what significance that had. At least he did until he heard the hat begin to sing.

When the hat was finished, the students applauded wildly, and the hat gave something resembling a bow. Harry glanced up at the teacher's table. He saw Dumbledore, who looked back at him, eyes twinkling madly. He saw Hagrid (the man was hard to miss), Snape, a man in a purple turban, a plump looking witch with curly brown hair, and a tiny, dwarf-sized wizard with white hair who was standing on his stool. Harry wondered if this was the Professor Flitwick that Daphne said spoke so highly of his mother.

McGonagall seemed to have the ability to quiet the room with her presence, and Harry guessed she was not one to cross. Harry also guessed her behavior in Dumbledore's office had been an aberration brought on by the fact she was close to his parents.

"When I call your name, please step forward and place the Sorting Hat on your head."

"Abbot, Hannah." A small blond-haired girl with pigtails ran up.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat cried after some deliberation. Hannah Abbot ran off to join the Hufflepuff table.

"Bones, Susan." A brown-haired girl ran up. "HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Boot, Terry." A dark-haired boy ran up. "RAVENCLAW!"

“Brocklehurst, Mandy.” A tall, dark-haired girl with vibrant blue eyes ran up. “RAVENCLAW!”

“Brown, Lavender.” A brown-haired girl who had been gossiping earlier ran up, and after a long minute, the hat cried

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“Bulstrode, Millicent.” A heavy-set girl with who vaguely resembled a hag ran up. “SLYTHERIN!” There were hisses from the Gryffindor table. Harry rolled his eyes.

“Crabbe, Vincent.” One of the boulder-like bodyguards plodded up. “SLYTHERIN!”

“Crawford, Michael.” A blond-haired boy with Daphne’s grey-green eyes ran up. Harry made a mental note to ask if they were related. “RAVENCLAW!”

“Davidson, Kevin.” “HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Finch-Fletchley, Justin.” “HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Finnegan, Seamus.” Harry grinned as the sandy-haired boy ran up. “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Granger, Hermione.” Harry sat up in his seat as Hermione got up and ran to the stool, eagerly jamming the hat onto her head. It was silent for a moment before the Hat cried, “GRYFFINDOR!” Harry’s heart sank. He’d hoped he’d get to be with Granger, but he had a feeling that Godric’s house wasn’t for him.

“Greengrass, Daphne.” A blond-haired girl with discerning blue eyes and a strangely disinterested expression calmly moved to the stool. “SLYTHERIN!”

“Goyle, Gregory.” The other boulder-like bodyguard plodded up. “SLYTHERIN!”

“Longbottom, Neville.” The roundish brown-haired boy, looking extremely nervous, ran up to the stool. “GRYFFINDOR!” Harry was surprised by that.

“MacDougal, Morag.” A tall blond-haired boy with glasses ran up. “RAVENCLAW!”

“MacMillan, Ernest.” A black boy with an arrogant air about him ran up. “HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Malfoy, Draco.” Harry sat up abruptly as he saw the blonde from the train strut up to the hat. *Malfoy*. He knew that name. Daphne said his father had bought his way out of Azkaban, and on one occasion, had nearly killed his mother with a Severing Curse that almost took her leg off. James had gotten her help just in time to prevent her bleeding out. “SLYTHERIN!”

“Moon, Elisha.” A black girl ran up. “SLYTHERIN!” More hisses from the Gryffindors.

“Nott, Theodore.” A boy with wire-frame glasses, short brown hair, and constantly moving brown eyes walked slowly up to the hat. It had barely touched his head when it bellowed, “SLYTHERIN!”

“Parkinson, Pansy.” A girl with blond hair ran forward. “SLYTHERIN!”

“Patil, Padma.” One of the Indian girls ran up. “RAVENCLAW!”

“Patil, Parvati.” The second Indian girl, obviously her identical twin sister, ran up. “GRYFFINDOR!”

And now...

“Potter, Harry.” Harry jumped off the table, ignoring the hisses and gasps.

“*The Harry Potter?*”

“He’s a bleeding little *runt*?”

“*I can’t believe he beat You-Know-Who!*”

“He’s a Gryffindor for sure! We’re going to get Potter!”

Harry saw the Professors get to the edge of their seats, and sighed. This was the price of fame. *If only they knew.*

He ran up to the Sorting Hat and pulled it on before sitting down.

A voice sounded in his ear. *So here is the Boy-Who-Lived, the last of the Potters.*

Yeah, Harry thought glumly, here is the savior.

Quite a bit of pressure put on one so young, the hat said, “but where to put you. You are no Hufflepuff, I’ll tell you that. You have a brilliant mind, one any Ravenclaw would envy, but there is more than that. Hmm, let’s see. You have a desire to prove yourself, to overshadow the fame you believe is undeserved. Quite difficult that will be. Now, I don’t think Gryffindor is the right place for you, do you?

Daphne didn’t think so, Harry thought. And I tend to agree with her. I’m not that brave, I’m better at avoiding trouble entirely.

Perhaps, although it’d be quite a stretch to call you a coward. Now, you are quite resourceful aren’t you. Lots of cunning there. And...what’s this...hmmm...quite rare that talent is. Now, I think that you would fit best in Salazar’s house. You have the mind, the talent, and the necessary qualities. You could be great there.

I don’t want to be great. I want to be normal. I just want to be accepted.

Nonetheless, I think you would do best in...

“SLYTHERIN!” the hat cried. Harry pulled the hat off, expecting to see a silent and stunned crowd. He was not disappointed.

What he was surprised to see was that the reactions were stronger than he imagined they’d be. The Gryffindors were staring at him like he was a traitor of some kind, and Hermione looked horrified. *Goddamn Gryffindors probably telling her that all Slytherins are dark.* The Ravenclaws were analyzing him like a book, or something similar.

The Hufflepuffs looked absolutely terrified. He spared a glance at the Head Table.

Hagrid was white, and had knocked over his goblet. McGonagall looked depressed, and disappointed, but resigned, as though she'd expected this. Dumbledore looked like someone had died. The rest of the teachers were staring at him, open-mouthed. Only Snape was different. He was giving Harry a glare full of so much hate that Harry felt the sudden urge to run in the opposite direction as fast as he could.

What surprised him was the reaction of the Slytherins. About half of them looked like they'd eaten something that disagreed with them, and several goblets had been knocked over. Some looked pleased, and others just extremely curious. Harry calmly walked over to the Slytherin table and sat down a couple seats away from anyone else, taking a sip of pumpkin juice.

McGonagall recovered, and continued. Sally-Ann Perks was sorted into Hufflepuff, Ron Weasley (who glared at Harry as he went up) and Dean Thomas became Gryffindors, Lisa Turpin became a Ravenclaw, and Blaise Zabini joined Harry at the Slytherin table. Harry just stared into the distance, his expression blank, thoughts running through his head. He wasn't disappointed to be Sorted into Slytherin, he was disappointed that he had the awful feeling he might not have that many friends for a while.

When the Sorting concluded, Dumbledore stood up. "A few start of term notices. First, this year more than ever, the Forbidden Forest is off-limits to *all* students. In addition, the Third-Floor corridor is out of bounds, to anyone who does not wish to die a most painful death." This was met by a hiss of whispers and several groans from the older students, but quite a few of the First Years were staring at him in disbelief. Harry wondered what on earth was in the corridor and, if it was that dangerous, what it was doing in a school. "Argus Filch, our caretaker, has posted a list of all forbidden items on his office door. I believe the list is 414 items long."

"And now, I would like to say a few words. Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you. Dig in."

Massive quantities of food appeared as Harry stared back at the Headmaster in disbelief. Muttering something like, “*crazy old man*,” Harry loaded his plate with liberal amounts of everything he could reach and began to eat. He had just bitten into a roll when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up to see Draco Malfoy, and his eyes narrowed. The blond-haired pureblood looked taken aback.

“Have we met before, Potter?” he asked. Harry noted that Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him.

“No. What do you want?” Harry asked.

“Well, I wanted to introduce myself. I’m Draco Malfoy, and this is Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. You’ve been living out of the country, I know, so you probably don’t know this. There are certain types of wizards that are better than others. You don’t want to get involved with the wrong sort. I can help you there,” he said, extending his hand. Harry looked at it liked he was diseased.

“And why *exactly* would I accept advice on the worth of wizards from the pureblooded heir of a former Death Eater?” Harry asked. What little color that was in Malfoy’s face drained.

“*What did you say, Potter?*”

“I said that your father, Lucius Malfoy, was a Death Eater. One that nearly killed my mother, and one that used his wealth to get out of Azkaban,” Harry replied evenly, subtly reaching into his robes, his fingers closing around his wand. Malfoy’s surprised look gave way to fury.

“*Why you little-*“ Malfoy was cut off by the appearance of Harry’s wand in the hollow of his neck.

“*Back off, Malfoy,*” Harry said coolly. Malfoy looked outraged.

“Get that bloody wand off of me.” Harry obliged, but kept it pointing at him.”

“You probably don’t know half the spells I know.” Harry knew that Malfoy, as a pureblood, probably had prior training. So did Harry.

"And I was raised by Daphne Dressler. Name ring a bell?"

Malfoy's face paled again. Obviously, it did. He angrily spun on his heels, muttering, "You've made an enemy today, Potter," before returning to his seat, his bodyguards behind him.

Theodore Nott whistled. "You sure know how to make an impression."

"Shut up."

"As you wish," Nott said, turning back to his conversation with Daphne Greengrass. Harry let out a sigh. He already missed his friends and his aunt.

He glanced up at the Head Table. Snape's gaze was as venomous as ever, and he was now barking at a terrified looking man in a purple turban. Both of them suddenly glanced at Harry, and he felt a hot pain shoot through his scar. Blinking rapidly, he looked back up, but the professors were back to arguing.

After a disastrous attempt at singing the school song, in which Harry's eardrums nearly bled from the horrid mix of pitches, tempos, and tunes, Dumbledore bid the students goodnight. Harry followed the Slytherin Prefects out of the Great Hall and into the dungeons. Harry's day didn't end there though. Snape passed by, looking absolutely murderous, and Harry knew he wouldn't enjoy being in the company of that man.

Where he reached the hidden entrance to the Slytherin common room, Harry rolled his eyes at the password: Pureblood. Malfoy gave him another death glare. Harry tiredly walked into the First Year dorms, and saw his trunk had been placed next to his bed. He sat down on his bed and kicked off his shoes. Malfoy approached, and Harry let out a tired yawn.

"What now, Malfoy?"

"Think our password is funny, do you, Potter? Think you are better than us?"

“Slytherin House as a whole? No. You? Yes. I’m not creating pointless arguments with a person too tired to take anything you are saying seriously,” Harry said. “Sod off Malfoy, you can yell at me in the morning.”

“*Better watch your back, Potter,*” Malfoy hissed. Harry rolled his eyes and closed his hangings. Pulling out *Hogwarts: A History*, he cast the Lighting Charm and began to read about Rowena Ravenclaw.

Chapter 5: First Impressions

Harry got up early the next morning. He'd had a strange dream that had ended in the green light of the *Avada Kedavra* curse that had given him his scar. Slipping out of bed, he took a quick shower and dressed. He grabbed his book bag, stuffing *Hogwarts: A History* in with his school books, and then pulled some parchment and a pen out of his trunk, and began to write.

Dear Daph,

Well, the train ride was relatively uneventful; I actually got a compartment to myself and read peacefully the whole way there. I thought had made a friend, a bright Muggleborn girl named Hermione Granger, but now I'm not so sure. The problem is that I was Sorted into Slytherin. I personally don't mind that, though Professor Snape seems to think me a stain upon the earth (could you shed any light on that?), but it seems that you were right about people making assumptions. My sorting shocked the whole school, and I didn't get many friendly looks. To make matters worse, I'm having trouble with Lucius Malfoy's son, Draco. Bloody idiot tried to befriend me and I told him I'd rather not get chummy with the son of a Death Eater. Bloke didn't take that too well, though my wand at his neck managed to make him shut up. So that's my first day.

Can only hope it gets better, I guess.

Love,

Harry

Looking over the letter, Harry added a few things and then rolled it up and tied it with a ribbon. He gathered his things and set off for the Owlery. He exited the Common Room, and checked his watch to see it was six o'clock. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought it wasn't too early. He set off through the freezing dungeons, and took the staircase into the Entrance Hall. He didn't encounter anyone on his way to the Owlery. He found Hedwig, who gave him an affectionate nip as he flung her out the window. He watched her fly into the dawning sky and then turned around. He spotted Hermione Granger standing at

the base of the steps, her eyes widened in fear. He took a step toward her, but she turned and ran out of sight.

Harry slumped against Owlery wall. *Why won't anyone give me a chance? Have I declared my loyalty to Voldemort without knowing it?* Harry was starting to wonder what the Sorting Hat had been thinking when it sorted him into Slytherin. How was he supposed to be great if everyone cowered at the sight of him? Or hated his existence, like Snape?

Harry wandered back down from Owlery, and looking down at the ground, nearly ran into Professor Snape, who appeared to be in a foul mood.

“*POTTER! What are you doing?*” he roared. He was literally shaking with rage.

“Sorry, Professor Snape. I wasn’t watching where I was going. I won’t let it happen again,” he said in the politest voice he could muster.

“See that you don’t, *Potter!*” he snapped, then stalked off.

Harry shook his head, and went back down to the Great Hall for breakfast. The Hall was mostly empty, with only a few older students hurriedly finishing their summer homework. The Slytherin table was more or less deserted, so Harry took a seat approximately where the rest of the First Years would sit. He pulled out his favorite book, and began to read. As the minutes passed by, more and more students began to drift into the Great Hall, and the noise level got steadily and steadily higher.

To his surprise, it was Theodore Nott who decided to sit next to Harry, followed by Millicent Bulstrode. Harry glanced up at them, and then noticed the Great Hall was almost full, and most of the students were eagerly awaiting the appearance of breakfast. Harry put away his book, and glanced over at the Gryffindor table. He saw Hermione Granger chatting happily with the pompous Weasley; the one Harry thought was called Percy.

She looked his way and froze, and even from the distance they were at, he could see the fear in her eyes. He watched as Ron, Fred, and

George Weasley followed Hermione's gaze, and before Harry could look away, he saw half the Gryffindor table glaring at him furiously. He blushed and looked down, frustrated. Nott and Bulstrode were now discussing some obscure pureblood ritual. Harry couldn't ever recall feeling more alone in his entire life.

Harry ate silently before glancing at the schedule that Professor McGonagall had placed next to him. He noted he had her class, Transfiguration, with the Gryffindors first thing; a double period. Harry let out a long sigh. This was not a great way to start his day. Harry got up, pulling his book bag onto his shoulder, and following Malfoy and his gang, who were now treating Harry as if he didn't exist. As Harry rounded a corner, he suddenly found himself grabbed by the collar, shoved into a wall, and staring at two very unfriendly wands, held by two angry looking twins. Harry swallowed, hard.

"So, Potter? Thought it'd be *funny* to harass the Muggleborn?" George asked angrily.

"Yeah, well, you know what? We're known as the top pranksters in the school for a reason," Fred added.

"So how would you like to walk around with your wand shoved up your-"

"FRED! GEORGE! LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

Harry, Fred, and George looked out, and were stunned to see Hermione standing there, her face white. Harry tried to send her a grateful smile, but she still looked absolutely terrified of him.

"Why, Hermione?" Fred asked. "This Slytherin filth was trying to scare you this morning!" He said, jabbing his wand in Harry's direction while George shoved him into the wall.

"No...he wasn't...we were kind of...friends," she whispered nervously. "He...didn't seem that bad."

"Hermione," Harry said, straining against George. "My mum was Muggleborn, why would I have anything against them?"

“Because you’re a Slytherin!” she yelled illogically, before running off. Bewildered, the Weasley twins roughly released Harry and gave him a final glare before moving on. Harry picked up his bag and continued to his class, wondering what the hell had just happened.

Harry reached McGonagall’s class just on time, and hurriedly took a seat by himself. Hermione was deliberately avoiding his gaze, and her eyes were red, as if she had been crying. He couldn’t understand what had happened to make this go so wrong.

Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom hurried in several minutes late, and took their seats. Harry abruptly noticed the presence of a small tabby cat, with rings around her eyes that looked suspiciously like McGonagall’s eyeglasses. As the implications of what he had just thought began to register, the cat leapt off the desk, and by the time it had landed, turned into an annoyed looking Professor McGonagall, who was obviously an animagus. Ron and Neville froze as she glared at them.

“Do you have a reason for being late, Misters Weasley and Longbottom?” she asked.

“Uh...” Ron said, trying to think off an excuse, “Peeves?”

“A pathetic excuse, Mr. Weasley. There were several snickers, and Ron glared at him, even though Harry hadn’t done anything. It was almost like Weasley was trying to find any excuse he could to dislike Harry.

McGonagall strode to the front of the class, and the quiet whispering that had been going on in between two Gryffindor girls. “Welcome to Transfiguration. This is a difficult and dangerous branch of magic, and horseplay will not be tolerated. If you are unable to take this seriously, you will leave and not return.” She then proceeded to turn her desk into a pig, to wild applause. After restoring it, the class took notes for the remainder of the first half of class.

“Very well, now that we have covered the basics, we’ll move on to some application. Please open *A Beginners Guide to Transfiguration* to page 12, and read the passage on cross-material Transfiguration.

Ms. Patil, please come up here and hand out these matchsticks. When you have finished reading, please attempt to change them into needles. Fear not if you are unable to, very few can on the first few goes."

After Harry read the passage, he took out his wand and placed the matchstick in the center of his desk. Closing his eyes, he envisioned the matchstick as a needle and jabbed quickly at the matchstick. Harry opened his eyes to find that the wood now had a metallic glint. He glanced around and saw that Hermione appeared to be the only one who had done anything at all. He tried again, and found that the stick looked even more metallic and was considerably pointier. Another glance at Hermione, who appeared to be the only other one who was accomplishing anything, showed she hadn't made any progress, and she was now furiously re-reading the passage. Harry tried three more times in quick succession, and just as he opened his eyes he heard a squeal and saw Hermione bouncing in her chair.

"Professor McGonagall! Professor McGonagall, I did it!" she said happily. The Gryffindor Head of House came over and picked up the needle, smiling proudly. "Excellent, Ms. Granger. 10 points to Gryffindor." Harry looked down to see his was identical.

"I've got it too, Professor," Harry called. McGonagall stiffened visibly and walked over to check. She picked it up and spent considerably more time examining it. "Very good, Mr. Potter. Your father, James, was one of the few who have gotten this one on the first go in the time I have been teaching it." With visible effort, she said, "10 points to Slytherin."

Half the heads in the class spun. The Slytherins had a triumphant smirk on their faces, though Malfoy was glaring at him. Nott gave him a mysterious smile. The Gryffindors, once more, looked as if Harry had professed his undying love for Lord Voldemort. They were acting as if he had intentionally showed up their resident know-it-all. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Think you're better than her, Potter. Had to show up the Muggleborn, didn't you?" Ron whispered nastily. Harry's self-control buckled and he gave him a withering glare, one that had the Gryffindor jerking

back in alarm. His attention was drawn elsewhere, though, as McGonagall pronounced Malfoy's needle as 'not nearly good enough, prompting guffaws from the Gryffindors that were silenced by the professor's glare.

"Quiet. Mr. Malfoy has still made much more progress than you, Mr. Weasley." The bell rang. "Homework tonight is to practice until you get the needle. I *can* and *will* check to see if you transfigured your own matchstick. Anyone who cheats will receive a zero and a detention."

They headed off to lunch, and Harry ate silently, not even bothering to glance over at the Gryffindor table. He'd seen the glares they had sent his way as he entered the Great Hall. When he finished, he saw Ron Weasley get up and leave, alone.

Harry hurried out of the Great Hall and got past Weasley. Then, he waited patiently for Weasley to come along. Standing in the shadows, he said quietly. "What is your *problem*, Weasley?"

Ron spun around, and looked shocked to see Harry standing behind him. Harry's hands hung limply at his sides; he didn't want to scare Weasley off.

"What do you mean?" Weasley asked dumbly, looking around for potential help. The corridor was empty.

"I mean, why do you desperately scratch and claw to come up with *anything*, real or imagined, that will allow you to justify treating me like pond scum," Harry said in a deathly quiet whisper, his voice level. Weasley gulped loudly.

"I don't...Why'd you wait to accost me anyway? Scared of fighting us on your own? Let me go, or my brothers-"

"Your brothers have already threatened to shove my wand up my arse. Guess who stopped them?"

"Malfoy and his gang, no doubt. I can't believe *you* get chummy with the son of a Death Eater. He was, you know."

"I know that. I also know that when my mother was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, he nearly *killed* her. You aren't very observant, Weasley. You wouldn't accuse me of being in with Malfoy if you seen me put my wand at his neck."

"You what?"

"Daphne taught me the best way to get a person to shut up is to put your wand right here," he said, gesturing at the hollow of his neck. "It worked real well on Malfoy. Your brother's were *only* the second to threaten me with bodily harm. By the way, the one that stopped them from making me walk around like a duck all day was the same Muggleborn you are constantly accusing me of harassing, Hermione."

"*What?*" Ron said, "Why we *she* help you? You scared her to death at breakfast."

"Forgive me for sparing a glance at the closest thing I have to a friend. It's really pathetic how all Gryffindors associate Slytherins with junior Death Eaters."

"It's because they are!" Ron protested. Harry laughed, a mirthless laugh of incredulity. "And all Gryffindors are light wizards, right?"

"Yeah, most of them."

"What would you say if I told you that a Dark Lord was a Gryffindor?"

"I'd say you were an idiot. You-Know-Who was a Slytherin."

"And Grindelwald was a Gryffindor. A roommate of Albus Dumbledore. Look what happened to him. Evan Rosier was a Gryffindor. He's lying six feet under, killed by my aunt, who *married* a Slytherin."

"Who's this aunt you keep mentioning? Who's Daphne?"

"Daphne Artemis O'Connor Dressler, that's who."

Ron gaped like a fish. "*The* Daphne Dressler? The Auror?"

“She’s not really my aunt. She’s actually closer to being my mother. She was my mum’s best friend in school, and hung out with Slytherins, including the one she married.”

“Wow...” Ron said dumbly.

“Think about what I’ve told you, Weasley. Think on it, and then decide whether or not I’m worth the effort you are putting into baiting me. I won’t approach Hermione unless she’s willing, but I can’t stop *looking* at her. I *want* her to be my friend. Tell her that if you wish, but we really need to get going. I’ve got Charms.”

“History of Magic, uh...later, Potter.” Harry nodded, and they went their separate ways.”

Harry arrived at Charms class five minutes late, and lost two points for Slytherin. Harry accepted, glad it wasn’t more, and sat down near Terry Boot. After the attendance, Flitwick launched into an explanation of Charms theory. They took many notes, and Flitwick assigned them an essay on the Tap-Dancing Charm. When the bell rang, Harry walked up to the front of the class instead of immediately going to lunch.

The small wizard was pulling some files out of his desk when he looked up and saw Harry approach. “Yes, Mr. Potter. If this is about the lateness I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“It isn’t, sir. I just wanted to ask: Did you teach my mother?”

“Ah, yes. Lily Evans, I can’t recall having a finer student. She was truly a great in Charms, one of the best of her generation. She got one of the highest scores in history on the Charms O.W.L. and received special recognition on her N.E.W.T. Charms exam. You will be extremely lucky to have inherited any of her talent. She was also quite good at Potions. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious, I guess. My aunt referred to her talent in the area a few time, and mentioned you specifically.”

"Your aunt? You live with Lily's sister?" the small wizard asked. Harry abruptly realized that he'd never heard of Flitwick being a member of the Order of Phoenix.

"No, I don't live with her. I live with my mum's best friend, Daphne Dressler. My real aunt hates magic."

"You live with Daphne? Really...How is she doing, it's been quite a while since I spoke with her."

"Fine, sir. We live in Newfoundland. She raised me since..."

"I understand, Mr. Potter. Now then, why don't we continue this conversation at a later date? You need to be off to your next class." Harry nodded politely and left.

Harry proceeded to a class he was looking forward to, History of Magic. Unfortunately, it wasn't nearly what he'd hoped. First, the teacher was a ghost. Second, the teacher was the most boring individual that Harry had ever met. He spoke in a monotone drone that sounded like a vacuum cleaner. In minutes, almost the entire class was asleep.

Malfoy was lazily leaning back in his chair, not listening to a word the Professor said. Harry was glad he had an interest in the subject, for he was just focused enough to take down a page of notes. He appeared to be the only one making an effort; none of the Hufflepuffs, who they had the class with, were awake, and even Nott and Greengrass looked bored out of their minds, and would only write down something every few minutes.

As Harry was leaving the class, he was met by Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. "Potter, your notes," he said casually. Harry stared at him. "What about them?"

"Are you an idiot? Give them to me!" Malfoy said, annoyed that this was taking so long.

"And why would I do that?" Harry asked, his fingers tightening around his wand.

"Because I told you so!" Malfoy said, extending his hand. Harry rolled his eyes. "Who died and put you in charge?"

"*Potter, hand the notes over and you might be able to walk again,*" Malfoy hissed. Harry jerked his wand out and held it in front of him. Crabbe and Goyle started and cracked their knuckles menacingly.

"How exactly does that involve you, Malfoy? Because if I wanted to, I could stun you and your goons and levitate all three of you into the Great Hall with your trousers down." Malfoy looked murderous. "You asked for it!" Crabbe and Goyle came forward while Malfoy plunged his hand into his robes for his wand.

Harry easily dodged Crabbe's first blow and spun out of the corner, wand extended, dropping into the fighting stance he'd seen Daphne use when she was practicing, wand held up to make it harder for him to be disarmed. "And you asked for a fight, Malfoy! *Expelliarmus!*" Harry yelled, aiming at Goyle. The spell caught him in the gut, and sent his flying backwards, wand flying out of his pocket and at Harry's feet. "*Stupefy!*" Harry yelled, aiming at Malfoy. The spell wasn't very powerful and he didn't get the wand movement down, but the force behind it still knocked Malfoy back, stopping him from incanting a spell that sounded like the Cutting Curse. Malfoy fell back, and Crabbe suddenly found himself unarmed, his two comrades on the ground, and Harry standing there with his eyes blazing.

"*POTTER!*"

Shit.

Severus Snape came flying up the corridor, his robes billowing behind him. He grabbed Harry by the collar and ignoring Harry's protests of innocence, proceeded to drag him to his office in the dungeons. He slammed the door closed behind him.

"I told your bloody guardian that teaching you advanced spells was a mistake and it looks like I was right. You are as arrogant as he ever was. I'm sure my dear godson isn't much better, but that doesn't give you a right to attack them, Potter," Snape ranted.

"Sir, Draco told his goons to attack me first. I was defending myself."

"As if I would believe that, Potter. Your head is swelling to enormous size."

"Sir--"

"Silence! I do not have time to put up with your groveling. Ten points from Slytherin! NOW GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!"

Harry didn't need to be told twice as he hurried out the door. He ran deeper into the dungeons and slumped against a wall when he finally exhausted himself. It was freezing down here, and he pulled his knees up to his chest. This was just great. Practically the entire Hogwarts student body despised or feared him, the most constant thing in his life was on the other side of the Atlantic, and now he had a teacher who obviously hated him more than any of the students. And he'd gotten that teacher so angry that he'd taken ten points from his own House, something his housemates would *not* be happy about.

He got up, realizing it was freezing and he'd already missed dinner. He found his way out of the dungeons easily enough; he'd more or less run in a straight line from Snape's office. He entered his dormitory, and headed straight for his bed. After completing his homework for Charms and History of Magic, he pulled out *Hogwarts: A History*, and read until he fell asleep.

Harry had his first Defense Against the Dark Arts class the next day, a double period. It turned out to be more or less a joke. Whether or not Professor Quirrel was competent or not, it was impossible to tell: the man was terrified of everything, couldn't get anything out without stuttering, and seemed unwilling to do a single practical lesson. Instead, he briefly described the course aims, which were vague to say the least, and told them to read the first fifteen pages of the book. Harry had just finished when the bell rang, and he hurried out of the classroom to avoid Malfoy and his goons.

Their second History of Magic class wasn't much better than the first. The most interesting thing about Professor Binns was that he was a ghost; Harry wondered how long it had taken the man to realize he was dead. Harry was again the only person to stay awake long enough to take notes on the 11th Century Giant Wars. This time,

Harry left quickly, rather than give Malfoy a chance to confront him again.

Harry then had a rare free period, which he spent finishing his Charms essay and working on his History of Magic essay. He worked alone in the quiet library, interrupted only by the hissing whispers of people as they saw him, no doubt spreading some false rumor about his being evil. He had almost completed the essay when the bell rang. He head down to lunch, which was again spent alone and quietly.

After finishing, he pulled out his timetable and saw he had fifteen minutes to get to Herbology with the Hufflepuffs. He finally reached the Entrance Hall and joined the mob of students heading out onto the grounds. He spotted Nott and followed him to the greenhouses.

Herbology really wasn't that interesting. As much as Trish had tried to get her friends into the subject, Harry just wasn't into plants that much, magical or not. During the lesson, Professor Spout, the plump, red-cheeked witch that headed Hufflepuff, gave them an overview of the course aims and a few notes about safety and the rules. They had just enough time to start working with some Slithering Snodgrass that needed pruning. Harry managed to accomplish the task without killing the plant, more than could be said for Hannah Abbot, who more or less decapitated hers, making it the plant equivalent to the Gryffindor ghost, Nearly-Headless Nick.

After Herbology, the students proceeded to the Great Hall for dinner. He ate more than he usually did, and then decided to take a trip to the library in the time before curfew. He entered the huge, cavernous room and spotted the librarian, Madam Pince, chasing out a group of whispering Gryffindors. Harry looked over and saw a cart full of books to be put back on their shelves. Out of pure curiosity, Harry began browsing the titles. He saw nothing of interest, and moved on, browsing a shelf on Defense Against the Dark Arts. He moved deeper into the library, then spotted a familiar bushy-haired girl sitting in a chair, a large book on Alchemy sitting open on her lap.

"Hello, Hermione," Harry said pleasantly. Hermione started and dropped the book on the ground.

"*Potter!* What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"Nothing, I just want to talk to you," Harry said casually, leaning against the bookshelf." Hermione peered around him, as if looking for the backup he hadn't brought. *Or searching for an escape route.*

"Why?" she asked, her eyes a little less wide than they had been before. "Why won't you give it up? You're a Slytherin, I'm a Muggleborn Gryffindor. I have no reason to trust you, and you have no reason to associate with me."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Harry said impatiently. "Why isn't that good enough for you? Why can't you accept that I'm not evil?"

"Because I don't trust you. Because other Gryffindor girls have told me stories about Slytherins tricking them...now, they were a bit older, but...." Harry paled.

"*What?* You think I'd...I'd...take advantage of you?"

"Of course not, we're eleven. But I'm sure you and your Slytherin buddies could use some homework help. And I'm not going to be used that way. How much better is that?" she asked rhetorically, as she flipped another page in the massive alchemy tome.

Harry was shocked. "*Slytherin buddies?* Hermione, the whole house despises me."

She looked up in surprise, and then looked back down, shaking her head. "That's not going to work, Harry. I'm not that stupid."

"*You're doing a damn good impression of it right now!*" Harry hissed angrily. Hermione sat up, angry.

"I knew it. You are just like the other Slytherin bastards. Get the hell away from me, *Potter!*"

Angry beyond description, Harry tore out of the library, ignoring the scolding of Madam Pince. He ran down to the dungeons and the Slytherin Common Room. His appetite was gone. Harry kicked off his shoes, before grabbing them and hurling them angrily at the wall. He punched his pillow several times before collapsing, exhausted. He

noticed there were tears in his eyes. He buried his face in his pillow and sobbed.

It was just so unfair. He'd done nothing to deserve it. For once in her life, Daphne had been wrong, horribly wrong. The four houses were not equal. He wondered what it would have been like if he'd been a Gryffindor, or maybe even a Ravenclaw. Hell, even being Hufflepuff would have been better than his current situation. Hermione would probably be his friend; his roommates probably wouldn't hate him. His head of house wouldn't a grouchy git who hated his guts.

He stayed there, lying in his misery, until sleep took him.

Harry awoke the next day very early, a good thing because he realized that he had slept in his robes, and he needed a shower badly. After taking a long one, trying to come to terms with the school rejection he was facing, Harry dressed and sat back on his bed, trying to get his mind off things by reading. It was wholly unsuccessful.

Truth be told, he wasn't completely sure why he was so persistent in trying to befriend Hermione Granger. He didn't care that she was Muggleborn; he'd had several Muggle friends when he was younger. She was a brilliant witch and extremely intelligent, and overall seemed like a very interesting person. He was a little young to be fancying girls, so he figured that wasn't it. Perhaps it was because she had talked to him on the boat.

He was angry, too. Angry with the Gryffindors for making up lies and rumors. Angry for Snape hating him for no apparent reason. Angry with the school for being unable to see past his Slytherin badge and green tie. Angry with Daphne for making him believe that all the Houses were equal. Angry with the hat for putting him here. And most of all, angry with Hermione for believing the stuff the Gryffindors were saying when she was far too smart for that.

The day's lessons passed uneventfully. So did the next days. Still no response from Daphne, and Harry was getting extremely lonely at this point. He considered starting to write in a diary but decided against it. He desperately used a school barn owl to send notes to his

friends in Ottawa, hoping for news. He left out the part about him being hated, feared, and alone.

Finally, on Friday, Daphne's reply came. A good thing, too, because first thing he had double Potions with Snape. Something told me he needed good news, and he got it when Hedwig flew in with the rest of the morning post, also carrying a small package. Hedwig came down for a landing and Harry absent mindedly scratched her behind the ears as she picked at his bacon. He grabbed the envelope and ripped it open.

Dear Harry,

I'm very sorry how low it has taken me to reply to this, but I forgot to lower the Unplottability Wards, and Hedwig was flying around in circles for over two days, looking for the house. I've lowered the wards, as secrecy is no longer needed, so this shouldn't be a problem again.

I'm pleased to hear that you were Sorted into Slytherin. Despite what others may think, it is a house that offers opportunity for success and advancement for those willing to take it. I hope that things are better with your roommates, though I doubt it.

As for Snape, well, it's a long story. The short of it is for various reasons, your father and Professor Snape hated each other with a passion. They both staged rather vicious pranks and exchanged hexes as often as words. Several of pranks your father pulled were cruel and dangerous, though rest assured, Snape was no better. James did get better though, otherwise Lily wouldn't have gone near him. He was a good man, and he regretted being such an arrogant fool, so don't think badly of him. It's not surprising that Snape hasn't let it go, the man is one to hold a grudge. Tread lightly around him, Harry. Don't antagonize him, and don't let him provoke you. He'll try his best.

I hope you've made up with your friend, Hermione. I'm sure you've got at least someone to talk to. If not, I'd recommend seeking out Hagrid. He was a great friend of your parents, and is quite interesting to talk to. Just don't eat any of his cooking, or agree to go with him to meet what he lovingly refers to as 'interesting creatures.' Interesting

for him means they have sharp claws, teeth, and or some dangerous ability.

I hope things improve. Remember, I'm always there.

Love,

Daphne

Harry put the letter down. Daphne's worst case scenarios had proven true on every count. He was puzzled by the suggestion of seeking out the Hogwarts gamekeeper, but figured it was worth a shot. Suddenly, Daphne's letter was grabbed out of his hand by Malfoy. Before Draco could read a word, Harry's wand was at his throat.

"*Drop it, Malfoy,*" Harry whispered. Malfoy glared at him and released the letter. Harry pulled his wand away and folded up the letter, pushing it into his robe pocket. Malfoy stalked off.

After breakfast was over, Harry headed back down to the dungeons for what promised to be pure torture. He was not disappointed.

Harry arrived several minutes early, but he'd been beaten by most students, and Snape thus decided that Harry was late. "Detention, Potter, with Mr. Flich. You will arrive on time in future. Now get in!"

Fuming, Harry did as he was ordered, sitting down at an empty table. Ron Weasley snickered behind him, while Dean Thomas was trying to hold back laughter. Malfoy walked in just then, and Snape, of course, pretended not to notice him. The tables were soon completely full. Harry glanced around and realized that Hermione wasn't there.

Seconds later, she burst into the room, panting heavily. Snape rounded on her, and she stuck out her hand, handing him a note. "I was speaking with Professor McGonagall. Snape sneered. "Very well. Take a seat, *NOW!*"

Hermione gave him a strange look, than Harry watched her start scanning for a spot. Harry understood why she had suddenly froze, every spot except for the one next to Harry was occupied. Harry

shrugged helplessly. She looked at Snape, her eyes wide with fear. Harry felt a surge of anger go through him.

"Is there a *problem*, Miss Granger?" Snape asked icily. "Or is the insufferable know-it-all simply unable to find her seat?" Hermione jerked her head up and glared at him. "*Sit down, Granger!*" Snape barked. Hermione let out a yelp and ran over to Harry's table, gingerly sitting down next to him and watching him closely, as if expecting him to attack.

Snape moved to the front of the class, and summoned a sheet of parchment. He began reading off the attendance, making a snide comment under his breath every once in a while, mostly for Gryffindors.

"Granger, Hermione," he said, adding, "*I do hope that she won't die from sitting next the Evil Harry Potter.*" Hermione stiffened, and glanced at Harry, who was looking in Snape's direction with a blank look on his face.

Finally, he reached...

"Mr. Potter...our new *celebrity*..." he sneered. "I do you hope you realize that favoritism and your *status* will earn you no special treatment..."

"No, sir. I'm aware that the only special treatment I'll get from you is negative," Harry replied evenly.

Snape looked furious. "Five points from Slytherin for your cheek, Potter!" He gave Malfoy a pointed look. Harry seethed as he realized what Snape was doing. He was trying to turn the whole of Slytherin House against him by taking points from his own house. It was well known that Severus Snape *never* took points from Slytherin. Jars of potion ingredients around him began to rattle as his anger pounded in his veins. Then he realized what was going on and let out a long breath. The rattling stopped. *I got to stay calm, it's been a while since I caused accidental magic.*"

He was broken out of his thoughts by Snape barking, "*POTTER!*"

He looked up. "What would I get if I added a root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry searched his mind. It sounded vaguely familiar. *Draught of something. Draught of Death...No, Draught of Live Death...NO, Draught of Living Death!*

"*Anything*, Potter? I'll have you know—" Snape began.

"Draught of Living Death, sir. An extremely powerful sleeping potion," Harry said in as level a voice as he could manage. He was still seething from Snape's attempt to make his life miserable *outside* the classroom.

Snape looked surprised that Harry knew the answer for a moment, then smirked and said, "I don't believe I instructed you to aid Mr. Potter, Miss Granger. Five points from Gryffindor." Hermione stiffened, while Ron let out a cry of protest, then glared at Harry, as if it was his fault.

"I have an idea," Snape said, pulling his wand out and aiming it at Hermione. "*Silencio!* Now, Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?" Harry was baffled, he'd never heard of such a thing. Hermione, meanwhile, was turning red, and Harry saw tears welling up in her eyes. Behind her, Malfoy was snickering loudly, while Crabbe and Goyle were guffawing. Pansy Parkinson was smirking. Harry's ire rose again.

"I don't know sir, it wasn't covered in the first few chapters of the textbook. I do suggest you fix Hermione before I report you to Dumbledore for hexing a student. I don't believe that is allowed."

"*Why of all the little insolent...POTTER! Detention and 15 points from Slytherin!*" angrily yanking his wand up, he aimed it at Hermione and barked, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Weasley and his Gryffindor apparently found the whole situation hilarious, both Hermione ranting while unable to make noise and Harry getting disciplined for talking back. They were hunched over their desks, their faces red and their hands in their mouths to keep from laughing. Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but

Harry placed his hand on his shoulder. She jerked back in surprise, and Harry gave her a look that said “*Don’t say anything.*” To his surprise, she tentatively nodded.

“For your information, *Potter*. I am not bound by anything when I quiz you. A bezoar is found in a stomach of a goat and is an antidote for most poisons.” The venomous look that Snape and the other Slytherins were giving him suggested that Harry might do well to get a stock of them.

To his surprise and pleasure, Hermione cast him a sympathetic look. Harry weakly smiled back at her and her expression changed to puzzlement.

“Let’s try again,” Snape whispered maliciously. “What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?” Harry was suddenly extremely grateful for Trish’s obsession with Herbology.

“Nothing, sir, they are the same plant,” Harry responded.

“Indeed. Muggles also call it aconite. Well? Why aren’t you writing this down?” He asked the class in general. There was a sudden rustling as students tore through their bags for ink, parchment, and quills.

After Snape detailed the course aims in brief (with not a few scathing comments directed at the Gryffindors and Harry), he introduced the potions they would be working on. Harry recognized it as one of the common beginner’s level potions, the Boil Cure Potion. Harry set to work preparing the cauldron while Hermione wordlessly gathered their materials from the student’s store cupboard. She returned with her arms full of ingredients and sat down as Harry brought the water in her cauldron to a boil.

“Alright, Potter. Do you want to add the ingredients or do you want me to?” Hermione asked. Harry got the feeling she’d rather do it herself.

“Well, I can tell you want to do it yourself, but remember that if I’m doing less work, Snape is more likely to give both of us a zero. You read off the materials and check my work. I think I can do this,

Flitwick mentioned my mum was good at Potions." Hermione nodded, she seemed to accept this.

They set to work. Harry had successfully added the first four ingredients and was carefully stirring when he saw felt Snape standing over him. Harry fought down his anger and continued stirring to Hermione's nod.

"Potter. The potion is a shade off. It should be purple. I hope Miss Granger doesn't mind her academic performance suffering because of your incompetence," he said silkily. Harry knew she would *if* his incompetence wasn't a figment of Snape's imagination. Harry had done everything right so far and knew it. Snape was just trying to sabotage him by disrupting his concentration.

"I'll keep that in mind, *sir*," Harry said. He glanced at the instructions, and with a confirming glance at his partner, the two lifted the cauldron off of the fire. Snape huffed and was about to say something when an explosion and a hissing sound came from one of the Gryffindor tables. "*Idiot boy!*" He yelled at Neville Longbottom. "Does it not say to add the porcupine quills *after* taking the cauldron off the fire? *Potter!* Though you'd look good if he messed up, did you? *Forgot* to mention to remove the cauldron? Five more points from Slytherin."

Harry gritted his teeth and said nothing, though he did notice Malfoy's questioning glance at Snape. Harry seethed, but took a deep breath.

"Add the porcupine quills now, Harry," Hermione instructed. Harry did so. They finished the potion early, and after double-checking all of the steps, Harry gathered a sample into the bottle and brought it up to Snape's desk. Hermione looked on expectantly.

There was a strangled cry of protest from the Gryffindors as Dean Thomas got a detention for swearing something under his breath when Malfoy earned thirty points for his potion, which was blatantly wrong. *Snape truly is brilliant. Take points from me, and make the House hate me, then give back all the points and more for no real reason. They still hate me, and Slytherin has a net benefit. Bastard.*

As the bell rang, Harry rose and without a second glance at Hermione, stormed out of the room, his emotions threatening to rip through the

delicate mental shield he had painstakingly constructed to prevent an outburst. His temper flared as he saw and heard the Gryffindors pointing and snickering at him, and he took off for his dormitory.

He needed to write Daphne.

Author's Notes: So here's the first batch. Read! Review! What do you think of Daphne? Is Harry waaay too mature for his age? Comments, Suggestions, ANYTHING

P.S. I finally think I have the uploading and formatting figured out, so if the story has been dissapearing on you, it's because I keep deleting it and reloading it.

Chapter 6: Taking to the Skies

Daphne's response came a few days later, but didn't really shed any light on his plight, or possible solutions. While Hermione no longer appeared to be terrified of him, she avoided him whenever possible and the Gryffindors continued to hiss at him, murmuring rumors of his Dark Arts abilities and tendencies. Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs weren't much better. Adding insult to injury was the fact that the vast majority of the rumors seemed to emanate from Ron Weasley. Harry had determined that the boy had likely been captured by the tale of his accomplishment, and was bitter over the fact that his idol had ended up his 'enemy' by being sorted into Slytherin.

Not that it excused his behavior. Weasley's reaction was nothing less than juvenile and had had consequences beyond the comprehending of his small brain. Weasley's false and vicious rumors had ensured that no one wanted anything to do with Harry. And if that was what Weasley had wanted, then the boy wasn't any better than Snape.

Speaking of the vile Potions Master, over the last few weeks, if it was possible, he'd gotten nastier. Once, he had actively sabotaged Harry's potion, then given him detention for complaining. He paired with Theodore Nott most of the time, the only one of his classmates that didn't hate him. Then again, Harry wasn't sure about that; he couldn't figure out the boy to save his life. He seemed extremely intelligent, and amazingly observant. With that came a talent of not being noticed.

Harry had no doubt he had enough blackmail material to get about anything he wanted. Overall, Nott was civil to Harry, not actively befriending him, but he was polite and helpful at times. The whole of Slytherin House hated him, because he was the only Slytherin that Snape would take points off of. Helped on by Malfoy's own rumors and lies, they felt that Harry was baiting Snape. It was not uncommon for him to be shoved into a wall by a passing student, or even to be hexed in the Slytherin Common Room. He'd gotten hit by more Stinging Hexes than he cared to remember.

As a result, Harry had isolated himself even more from the student body. He spent most of his time in the library, and skipped meals

often, especially when he was upset. He had no doubt that Malfoy would seek to exploit Harry's foul moods for his own amusement. He saw Hermione often, and they would exchange a polite nod occasionally. He also saw her often being harassed by members of her own House for his studious ways and rigid adherence to the rules. "Nightmare" was one of the kindest things they had said. Hermione would often run out of the library with tears in her eyes. All too often the perpetrator was that piece of flobberworm mucus named Ronald Weasley.

One morning, Harry saw a notice on the message board in the common room that made him want to scream and jump for joy at the same time. It was notice that Flying Lessons would begin after lunch. The Slytherins would be with the Gryffindors. The reason Harry was looking forward to it was because it would be his first opportunity to fly since he was buzzing around the field in Newfoundland on Daphne's Cleansweep 6.

Speaking of whom, Harry hadn't written his guardian in a week, feeling he had little to share. Daphne wrote often, encouraging him to keep going, and assuring things would get better. She also continued to tell him to see the Hogwarts Gameskeeper. Harry wasn't so inclined. The looks that he had been giving Harry since the Sorting could only be described as dark.

Harry skipped breakfast, the second meal in a row he had not attended. Harry estimated he'd probably lost seven pounds since he arrived at Hogwarts, and he'd been slim to begin with. He was a mess physically. His eyes had dark shadows under them from his nightmares. Most were of his parent's deaths, the first of the kind he had had for years. He'd hurriedly researched Silencing Charms after Malfoy had threatened to set Crabbe and Goyle on him the next time Harry's screaming woke him up.

Harry entered the library, and wasn't in the least bit stunned to see Hermione Granger sitting alone in one of the armchairs, a book Harry recognized very well in her lap. It was *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Harry wasn't surprised, and without really thinking, took a seat in the chair next to Hermione's. She looked up abruptly and froze.

"You really should worry so much about it. Flying, I mean."

"Easy for you to say. I'm guessing you've flown before," Hermione said, before turning back to her book.

"Yes, I have. And while I don't know if you'll be able to fly as well as I can, I'm sure you can at least become proficient. It's a matter of confidence."

"You certainly are modest, Mr. Potter," she said sarcastically.

"It's in my blood. Daphne's amazed I haven't broken my neck yet from the crazy stunts I pull. But I really wouldn't worry about it. Not enough to skip breakfast, anyway." Hermione looked up at him, and her expression softened. "Why are you here then?"

Harry shrugged. "Because I'm not hungry. That, and only Theodore Nott will talk to me without threatening or hexing me." Hermione looked horrified.

"What? That's terrible!" she cried.

"Tell me about it," Harry said, closing his eyes.

"But how—"

"*Hermione?* What the bloody hell are you doing talking to *him*?" Ron Weasley demanded. He was followed by Dean Thomas and Neville Longbottom, who looked decidedly uncomfortable. Harry spoke up.

"She's having a conversation, one I care to continue. Oh, and if you harass her in my hearing again, I'll hex you. I'm good at remaining unseen, by the way, and you aren't exactly eagle-eyed, if you get my meaning." Harry had no idea what had prompted him to say that, but it sounded good. Hermione was shocked, though it seemed to be because Harry was actually defending her.

Ron spluttered. "Why do you care?" he demanded.

"Because I think of her as my friend. Just as I think of you as a piece of flobberworm mucus. Do you have any idea what I go through

because you keep opening your mouth and making up vicious rumors? I'M NOT A BLEEDING DARK WIZARD!" he bellowed, losing all self-control. Several library books began to shake and the other people in the room looked around nervously.

"*You two! OUT! NOW!*" Madam Pince yelled. Ron and Dean ran out of the library as fast as they could manage. Harry then felt a hand on his shoulder, and was surprised to see it was Hermione's. The bushy-haired girl looked shocked at her own daring.

"Um...we had better get to breakfast. We can still get something," she said. She got up and gestured towards him. He shook his head. She nodded, and walked out. "*Thank you,*" she whispered, so softly that she might have thought Harry couldn't hear it.

After an uneventful double Defense class which involved a lot of reading on very general defensive magic, Harry went down to the Quidditch Pitch. He spared Hermione, who looked much better, a glance, and she nodded politely. Ron scowled and began immediately demanding some information from her. To everyone's surprise, Hermione slapped him hard across the face, almost knocking him over. With a glance back at him, she proceeded to take a spot much closer to the Slytherins, standing next to Daphne Greengrass. Ron, his cheek red, looked livid. Hermione gave him a glance that more or less implied sticking her tongue out, though the girl was too polite to actually perform the act.

Madam Hooch, a short woman with sharp features and yellowish, hawk-like eyes, strode confidently onto the Quidditch pitch, an obsolescent Silver Arrow 8 under her arm. "All right all of you. There are brooms on the ground, stand next to one, extend your hand and say 'UP!'"

Harry wasn't sure why this was necessary, but did so nonetheless. His broom instantly jumped into his hand, and he mounted the rickety old Shooting Star and waited for instructions. He glanced over at the other students. Hermione was beaming having called her broom on the first try. She sent a grateful glance his way, and he nodded. Weasley's broom kept rolling over. Neville's seemed to be rising tentatively, reflecting the nervousness of the rider. Malfoy had no

problems with his broom, though the Gryffindors snickered when Madam Hooch began going around the students, inspecting their groups, and informed him that he'd been riding it wrong for years.

Madam Hooch walked by Harry, remarking, "Good, Mr. Potter. I'm glad to see you've inherited your father's flying ability."

Once they all had the grips and mounting right, Hooch announced, "I'll blow my whistle and you will kick off from the ground *gently*." While some of the students, especially the muggleborns looked nervous; Harry knew he could do this in his sleep. However, Neville's nervousness was apparently quite serious as he not only kicked before Madam Hooch blew his whistle, but flew high into the air, gaining altitude at an alarming rate. Harry saw it coming, and sure enough, the slightly-overweight Gryffindor plummeted off his broom and landed hard on the ground with a loud, sickening CRACK.

Neville moaned in pain as Madam Hooch ran over. She did a quick check and muttered, "Broken arm...Hospital Wing for you, boy." She helped Neville, who was cradling his right arm against his chest and whimpering from the pain, to his feet. She began to lead him toward the castle, before turning around and yelling, "If I catch any of you in the air while I'm gone you'll be expelled before you can say Quidditch."

Harry placed his broom down and looked around for Nott, the only other person that would talk to him. The boy was in a group of Slytherins surrounding Draco Malfoy, who was mocking the injured Gryffindor, tossing a glass ball in his hand. Harry approached, and saw Malfoy was taunting an angry Ron Weasley. "Give it back, Malfoy!" Ron yelled. Harry identified the glass sphere as the Longbottom boy's Rememberall.

"How about no?" Malfoy said, "Why don't I leave it for him to find, say, up a tree? Or maybe I ought to just hover over him and make him jump for it? Maybe he'll end up like his parents, the clumsy lout." There was some evil snickering from the Slytherins, while the majority of the students looked confused. Harry's temper flared. He knew the story of the Longbottoms, two of the Ministry's top Aurors, who soon after Harry had defeated Voldemort, had been captured and tortured

into insanity by the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Junior. Daphne had taken the news hard, and Harry had finally asked about it after he read a reference to Frank Longbottom's capture of Death Eater and Ministry spy Augustus Rookwood, very shortly before the attack. Neville, who survived the attack, lived with his grandmother, an old family friend of Edmond Dressler's family.

"How dare you!" Harry hissed, drawing his wand. "You are really a *bastard*, you know that Malfoy? Were the Lestranges friends of your dad?" Malfoy's normally pale complexion went bright red, and Harry raised his wand. Instead of incanting a curse, Malfoy grabbed his broom and took to the skies. Without thinking about it, Harry summoned his broom wandlessly, using the adrenaline pounding in his veins to tap into his unknown ability.

Ignoring the whispers, Harry mounted his broom and shot into the sky, leveling out aimed right at Malfoy. The pureblooded heir looked shocked at Harry's skill on the broom. "Long way down, isn't it Malfoy?" Harry taunted. Then, as Malfoy opened his mouth to retort, Harry shot at him as fast as the rickety old broom would travel. Malfoy spun out of the way, and Harry spun around. "Care to try again?"

"You'll get yours Potter," he hissed angrily.

"Not before you. Give me the bloody ball and we'll call it a day." Malfoy smirked.

"Catch it if you can!" he said, then hurled the glass sphere in the direction of the castle. Harry shot after it, his green eyes locking on and following the flight. He forward and dove, calculating where the ball would be, and caught it as he went by. Then, adrenaline still pounding in his veins, he shot toward the ground. Malfoy was hovering, and not paying attention. His mistake. Harry dove forward and extended his legs. He collided with the blond-haired boy and sent him flying off his broom, landing face-first on the pitch. Harry landed and dismounted, drawing his wand.

"Had enough, you bloody coward-

"POTTER!" a very angry voice yelled. Harry winced turned around, seeing Severus Snape marching toward him, cape and robes

billowing behind him. The look on his face was that of pure fury. He grabbed Harry by the collar and began hauling him up to the school.

Harry was cursing himself with a colorful vocabulary he didn't know he had. After all that he had gone through, he'd lost his temper like an impulsive Gryffindor, flown without permission, and then attacked an unwary student. Harry expected to be led to the dungeons, and was surprised to see they were heading for the Charms corridor. They stopped outside the door to Flitwick's classroom, and then Snape rounded sharply on Harry.

"I want you on bended knee, thanking me. I'd expel you without a second thought, but I guarantee Dumbledore wouldn't allow it and right now I have a better use for you." He opened the door, sticking his head in. "FLINT! Get out here." A tall, heavily built boy that Harry felt resembled a troll walked out of the classroom. His brow furrowed when he saw Harry. "What's wrong, Professor?"

"Nothing. You have a Seeker, Flint," he said, glancing at Harry.

"You can't be serious Professor," Flint scoffed. "Him?"

"I'm dead serious. The only positive thing I've ever said about his arrogant father was that the man was brilliant on a broom. Potter maneuvered one of the old Shooting Stars like a Nimbus, and caught a Rememberall easily after a fifty-foot dive. He *then* proceeded to intentionally collide with Draco Malfoy, and landed without a scratch." Snape said it as if it pained him to compliment Harry." Flint stared at Harry in disbelief, while Harry maintained a straight face.

"Wow..." the boy said, clearly stunned. "Well, Higgs is garbage, and he's only on the team because of the rest of the candidates didn't belong on a broom. Get him a Nimbus, and I love to see what he could do if you are telling the truth." Snape gave a venomous smirk.

"I can imagine Potter rolling in his grave. His own son playing Quidditch for Slytherin. You get a reprieve, Potter, because I might have to kill Minerva if the Gryffindors win the Cup. They've got a great team, even without a great Seeker they can outscore anyone. You are going to change that. Get this straight, Potter. You will practice and play hard, and play to win, or I will ensure you don't have another

free weeknight the remainder of the year. Have I made myself clear." Harry nodded, stunned that Snape was actually extending him a second chance. He fully intended to grab it.

"Good. Now get back out there, Potter. Oh, and if you get caught fighting again, you *will* be expelled, Quidditch or not!" Harry nodded and took off for the pitch, his mind moving at several hundred kilometers an hour.

"How the bloody hell are *you* still alive, much less not expelled?" Malfoy demanded when he saw Harry sitting calmly, eating dinner.

"I caught the Rememberall," Harry said, suddenly realizing the thing was still in his pocket. "Excuse me," he said, shoving past Goyle, who was too surprised to stop him. He walked over to the Gryffindor table, which looked at him suspiciously, while the Weasley's looked murderous. "Where's Neville?" Harry asked.

"Over here," Neville said softly. He looked terrified. Harry walked over to him, withdrawing the Rememberall from his robes. "Sorry I didn't give this back, it slipped my mind. Thing's valuable, keep a better eye on it, would you?" he said handing the sphere back to the petrified boy. He turned and left, and was a few steps away when the whispers broke out. He ignored them and sat back down, turning to face the Ponce of Slytherin.

"Where were we?" Harry asked nonchalantly. Draco fumed and left. Harry smirked after him. His decision to ram Malfoy might not have been particularly intelligent, but he didn't regret taking the boy down a notch.

Harry ate quickly and went to bed, his head spinning. Before he turned in, he wrote a letter to Daphne about the new events, and politely asked for the broom she had promised. Setting aside the letter to send in the morning, Harry locked his curtains with a Vocal Password Locking Spell (a favorite of Daphne's, and an effective way of keeping Malfoy and his goons out), and cast a Silencing Charm in case he had any more nightmares.

Then he closed his eyes, and let the darkness take him.

Harry sent the letter in the morning, but the next few days passed in a blur for him. Daphne's response came several days later, in the form of three screech owls, carrying a long, thin package, trailed by Hedwig. The package landed directly on Harry's eggs, and he did a quick cleaning charm, while the other Daphne, Greengrass, opened her mouth to complain about her pumpkin juice being knocked to the floor. Harry saw Nott shift his gaze somewhat in the direction of the package, while still keeping his face trained on Millicent Bullstrode, who was enjoying a conversation with him. Harry smirked at the boy's tactics. It was no wonder he was so observant and yet unobtrusive. You needed a trained eye to catch when he was paying attention to you.

Harry ripped the envelope that Hedwig had dropped on his bacon open, and read the letter quickly.

Dearest Harry,

Congratulations on making the Quidditch team. While I am not thrilled in the matter you did so, I must admit that I was great friends with Alice and Frank, and had they been insulted in such a manner in my presence I would not have been proud of my response. I'm not thrilled about you flying around doing stunts on a broom either, but the worst injury your dad ever suffered was a broken wrist in fourth year, so I'm not quite as worried. I'm glad that classes are going well, and I hope that your social situation may be slowly improving. I'm not going to even consider withdrawing you until you make it to Christmas; trust me, things can change quickly. I again recommend you seek out Rubeus, he was a good friend of your parents and interesting to talk to. Don't eat anything he gives you or try to play with his pets, for your own safety.

Enclosed in the package is your new Nimbus 2000, as promised. It even has 'HJP-D' engraved on the handle (couldn't help myself with the last initial, you are my son in every way possible, Harry).

Love,

Daphne

Harry smiled as he read the letter, then stuffed it into his robes before anyone could read it, though he caught Nott looking at it, and he jerked his head back. Harry smirked, and Nott smirked at being caught. Nott was fully aware that after him, Harry was easily the most observant student in the school.

Excusing himself, Harry grabbed the package, slung his book bag over his shoulder, apologized to Greengrass for ruining her breakfast (she politely nodded, already eating more), and headed for the dungeons. When he got to the entrance, he was met by a strange sight: Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy standing within twenty feet of each other, and *not* hexing each other's bits off.

Draco ran forward, a triumphant smirk on his face. Before Harry could stop him, he seized the package and felt it, before smirking evilly. "Broomstick. This is it for you, Potter, First Years aren't allowed them."

"Yeah," Ron added, "you're in big trouble now." Harry rolled his eyes.

"What is going on here?" the silky voice of Severus Snape cut in.

"Potter's been sent a broomstick," Ron and Draco said at the same time.

Snape froze, then smirked, "Jumping the gun, aren't we, Potter?"

"I suppose so, sir. I just didn't want to fly my first match on one of the school brooms."

"Indeed. I assume it's from your 'aunt'? What model is it?" Snape asked. Ron and Malfoy stood off to the side, identical expressions of horror on their faces. Harry smirked.

"Yes, sir. We had an agreement that she would get me the newest model broom whenever I made the Quidditch team for the first time, a way of 'honoring' my dad (at this, Snape's smirk disappeared, replaced with anger, but Harry plowed on). It's a Nimbus 2000." Ron and Draco's jaws dropped farther. Snape's look of fury vanished as well.

"Ah, a good choice by Daphne, then. The best broom the Gryffindors have is Spinnet's Cleansweep 8. We'll be repeating, I expect." Harry nodded. "What are you two doing here?"

"Potter's on the Quidditch team?" Draco asked in disbelief.

"Yes, godson. I believe that our need for a Seeker and my need to wipe that irritating smirk off McGonagall's face when she tells me about her team this year was greater than my desire to see Potter expelled. He will be expected to win, of course, or the consequences will be dire."

"That's so unfair!" Ron blurted.

Snape gave a smirk that could be best described as conveying laughter. Though Harry doubted the man had laughed from mirth in his life. As was evidenced by his ability to show several different emotions by smirking, a Slytherin trademark.

"And what are you doing here, Weasley? Harassing a fellow student? Five points from Gryffindor, now get out of my sight!"

"What about him?" Ron yelled, pointing at Malfoy.

"Draco is simply helping me deal with an inter-House issue. Five more points from Gryffindor." Ron stomped off. Draco spun around, an expression of fury on his face. Harry went down to the dungeons to open his gift.

"Try not to break it, would you Potter?" Snape said as he walked away. Harry ignored him.

He went into the dormitory and jumped onto his bed. He ripped the paper off of the package and opened the box to expose a state-of-the-art broom. The Nimbus 2000 was polished, sleek, and Harry couldn't wait to try it out. Flint's first practice was the next day. He spotted the golden-lettered engraving 'HJP-D' that Daphne had referred to.

Following a week of constant harassment by Slytherins that were outraged he'd been given a starting role for attacking one of their own,

and Gryffindors who wanted to ensure Harry wouldn't make it to his first match, along with Flint, who was running his team ragged, the day of the match finally arrived. Harry awoke early and found that in the pit of his stomach was a tremendous ball of nervousness. Even a long shower failed to calm him down. He went to the Slytherin table, ignoring Malfoy's taunts that he was going to fail, but still couldn't eat anything. Predictably (or unpredictably), it was Nott who first broke through to him.

"You know, starving yourself isn't a good way to get ready for the game," he said without even looking in Harry's direction.

"And what would you know about that?" Harry snapped.

"Nothing. I don't play Quidditch, nor does anyone in my family. But I have basic knowledge of human anatomy and needs, and eating is one of the latter." He turned around, and began conversing with Blaise Zabini.

Harry managed to force some food into his stomach, then left alone and headed for the changing rooms. He quickly changed into his green and silver Quidditch robes, and picked up his Nimbus. Flint walked in, and looked amazed to see someone already there.

"Potter? Good, at least you understand the importance of getting here early," he said mostly to himself. The other members of the team began to file in. Bole and Derrick, the Beaters, the former with short, spiky black hair and beady eyes, and the latter with longish dark-brown hair and cruel, blue eyes. Adrian Pucey, one of the Chasers, came in a few minutes later. He had close-cropped brown hair and brown eyes. Montague, a large, slow boy, the other Chaser, joined him seconds later. Maggie Bletchley, the Keeper, and the only girl on the team, arrived a few minutes after him. The rusty-red-headed girl received a prompt chewing out from Flint, who appeared more irritated than ever. Harry stayed silent, trying to keep his mind on the strategies he'd worked on in practice.

Finally, game time arrived.

The seven team members walked over to the entrance of the pitch, and waited for Lee Jordon, the Gryffindor, friend of the twins, and

extremely biased announcer, to finish introducing the Gryffindor team, which was being cheered wildly by most of the students, while boos echoed from the Slytherins overhead.

“AND NOW THE SLYTHERIN TEAM!” Jordan yelled into his magical microphone.

“TEAM CAPTAIN AND CHASER, MARCUS FLINT!”

“CHASER PUCEY! CHASER MONTAGUE! BEATER BOLE! BEATER DERIK! KEEPER BLETCHELY!” The five Slytherins followed their leader out of the entrance and took to the skies, leaving Harry alone.

“AAAAAND SEEKER, HARRY POTTER!” On cue, Harry raced out of the entranceway and mounted his broom. Also on cue, the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs booed him mercilessly. Even some of the Slytherins were booing. Harry ignored them.

“Team captains! Shake hands!” Madam Hooch, the referee, commanded to Flint and the burly Gryffindor Fifth year, Oliver Wood, the Keeper.

The two approached each other with determination, and shook to break each other’s fingers. They broke apart and took to the skies, with Wood heading back to his goal. Harry noted the other Gryffindor players he’d been told about. The three female Chasers, Johnson, Spinnett, and the Second Year Katie Bell, the Weasley brothers, who were both excellent Beaters, in addition to being able to read each other’s minds, and the new Seeker, a wiry Second Year named Cormac McGladden.

“I want a nice, *clean* game!” Madam Hooch yelled. Harry snorted. Fat chance; almost all the plays that Flint practiced were borderline illegal. The Snitch was released, and disappeared from sight. Harry noted he was able to track it far longer than McGladden.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the game began.

Katie Bell, despite being the second youngest player on the field, was off in a flash, the Quaffle underneath her arm. She dodged Bole’s first

Bludger, and flipped the ball to Angelina Johnson, who relayed it backwards to Alicia Spinnett, who was cruising behind them. She flew at the goal, and Bletchley rose to block her, before the Gryffindor chucked the Quaffle with a no-look pass to Bell, who faked to the right before throwing the ball through the center hoop, past a dazed Slytherin Keeper.

“...AND BELL SCORES! 10-0 GRYFFINDOR!”

Flint angrily grabbed the Quaffle and began a two-man charge with Pucey, while Montague trailed behind. Flint was so focused on ramming the ball down Wood’s throat that George Weasley’s Bludger hit him full on, nearly knocking him off his broom, dropping the Quaffle in the process. Johnson was there to catch it. She roared toward the Slytherin goal with Bell right behind her.

Only Bletchley was in her way. Harry banked his broom to the right and shot straight at the Gryffindor, who pulled up with a terrified look on her face. Harry shot past her, grazing her broom tails with his Quidditch robe. It worked perfectly, as Johnson had just recovered when the Bludger crashed into her. She barely kept hold of the broom, and lost the Quaffle, which was recovered by Bletchley, who tossed it to Montague. Lee Jordan was not such a fan of Harry’s maneuver, though.

“-WHY OF ALL THE CHEATING, SLIMY-“

“JORDAN!” McGonagall yelled.

“Sorry, Professor. SO AFTER THAT BORDERLINE LEGAL MOVE OF POTTER, SLYTHERIN HAS THE QUAFFLE. PUCEY TO MONTAGUE, TO FLINT SHOOT, SAVE-“

But Wood was dazed by the rapid movement, and the ball sailed through the hoop, tying the game. Unfortunately for the Slytherins, that was the closest it would get to a Slytherin lead. The three Gryffindors were a well-oiled scoring machine, and soon the score was 70-20 Gryffindor. Harry began prowling up and down the pitch, searching for the Snitch. While he was spending his frustration productively, the same could not be said for the other team members. Gryffindor got penalties for Bole throwing his bat at Spinnett’s head,

Flint colliding with McGlaggen, Bole and Derrick attacking Wood with the Quaffle on the other side of the field, and Pucey ramming George Weasley for no reason at all. A half hour into the game, the Slytherins had rallied somewhat, and now trailed 110-60. Still, there was no sign of the Snitch.

Another Gryffindor goal later, Harry spotted it. He took off, and McGlaggen roared in hot pursuit. Harry wove around the stands, pulling up just in time to avoid the ground as he followed the rapidly moving golden winged ball. McGlaggen wasn't so fortunate, and crashed headfirst into the ground. But then a Bludger barely missed his head, and then another his leg. He lost sight of the Snitch, and banked away hard to avoid the twins' well-planned scheme to keep him occupied with their Seeker on the ground. Harry dodged two more Bludgers before McGlaggen was airborne again.

With their Seeker in the game once more, the Weasleys headed off in search of other prey, while Harry began prowling for the Snitch. He noticed McGlaggen was following him, and decided to try something he'd read about before. It wasn't a Wronski Feint, but it was damn close.

He banked hard to the left and took off, trusting his tail to follow him. He did. Harry dove toward the ground, and began weaving in and out, as if trying to complete the illusion of chasing the elusive Snitch. Harry suddenly flew high into the air, and headed straight at the ground, before banking off to the side. Harry then spotted the actual Snitch near the Slytherin goalposts. McGlaggen didn't.

"-WAIT! THE SNITCH IS OVER THERE...CORMAC DON'T-

Too late. The wiry boy had fallen hook, line, and sinker for Harry's trick, and pulled up in time to bounce off the ground and then crash into the Gryffindor stands, which he hit and fell to the ground in front of them, unconscious.

"WHY THE DIRTY! SLIMY! LITTLE SLYTHERIN BAS-

"JORDAN!" McGonagall yelled, but he noticed that she looked visibly furious. Harry didn't care, no matter what the Gryffindor said, what

he'd just done was perfectly legal. It was Cormac's fault for following him so closely.

Harry took off after the Snitch he'd seen on the other side of the Pitch and Harry's eyes locked on to it. He banked left, and was directly behind it, weaving and bobbing as he followed the elusive prize. He flew higher.

Suddenly, the broom gave a sharp jerk, and Harry was nearly thrown off. He spun his head around and dodged left, looking for the Weasleys, but they were over harassing Flint and Pucey. So *what had*-“

Harry's broom gave another lurch, and Harry realized that if this kept up, he was going to fall, and from this height, he was going to die. Wrapping his knees around his bucking broom, he dove toward the ground, trying to lose as much altitude as he could before he fell. In desperation, he pulled out his wand, and tried to cast a *Finite Incantatem*, but as he did so-

WHAM! A Bludger crashed into his back, and combined with a lurch from his broom, Harry finally lost the battle for control. His wand tumbled from his grasp, and he was catapulted off the Nimbus, and flailed helplessly as he plummeted toward the ground.

Harry saw the ground rushing up to meet him, a hard impact and several loud CRACKS, alone with agonizing pain. Then he fell into the darkness.

Harry awoke slowly, and the first sensation he had was of lying on a warm, soft bed. Harry slowly opened his eyes, and the last remnants of an evening sky shone through the window and nearly blinded him. He hissed in pain and then realized the world was extremely blurry. He groped around for his glasses and found them lying next to his wand. He put the glasses on, and tried to sit up. He glanced over at the bed near him, and saw Cormac McGladden sitting up, watching him.

“What I don't get,” he began as soon as he was sure Harry was awake, “is that you are skilled enough to pull off a modified Wronski

Feint and nearly get me killed, and yet you lose the game because you fall off your broom? I know getting hit by Weasley didn't help much, but from what Ron was telling me, you were going to fall anyway. What gives?"

Harry sat back and closed his eyes. "Somebody hexed my broom. It was bucking and jerking as if it had been cursed. Problem is, I only know of a few hexes that affect modern brooms and I doubt a student could execute any of them. Especially any of the younger ones who think I'm Voldemort reincarnate."

Cormac flinched at the name, but frowned. "You really think someone was trying to jinx your broom?"

"I'm sure of it," Harry said. "But I don't understand how. That's Dark Magic, and exceptionally powerful Dark Magic at that. Nothing a student could do."

"I don't know, maybe your broom was acting up," McGlaggen said, making it clear that he didn't want to continue the discussion. Harry tried to stretch, and felt a sharp pain in his arm. "What the hell happened to me?" Harry asked.

"-You fell off a broom, must have been thirty feet. Fractured arm, four broken ribs, two broken fingers and a concussion," Madam Pomfrey supplied as she walked briskly over to him, carrying a bottle of potion. "Good to see you finally awake, I was starting to wonder." She poured some potion into a goblet and forced it into Harry's hands.

"How long have I been out?" Harry asked before downing the potion and making a face at the disgusting taste. Madam Pomfrey grabbed the goblet out of his hands before pushing him back down onto the bed and fluffing his pillows. "Lie down," she commanded, and Harry stopped struggling, "two days."

Harry gaped at her. He glanced around to see if anyone had brought him his homework, but the space around his bed was empty. Harry noted that Cormac had several gifts on his bedpost and his books were stacked next to the bed. "Has anyone come by for a visit?" he asked hopefully.

"No," the mediwitch said sadly. "I'm afraid no one had expressed interest in seeing you. By the way, you aren't leaving for awhile, so if you want, I'll relay a request for books and such. You are to stay in bed for at least two more days." Harry nodded, though he was inside quite disappointed that *no one* had even thought to bring him his work.

"I'll need practically my entire trunk," Harry admitted. Especially if I'm here for a while."

"Fine. Mr. McGlaggen," she said, feeling the boy's forehead, "you are free to go. It's the double period, so get your books and be off. Mr. Potter, *lie down*." Harry complied. He called over to Cormac, "Sorry about landing you in the Hospital Wing."

Cormac blinked. "Why? I know the rules of Quidditch up and down, and you didn't do anything illegal."

He turned to go, and desperately Harry asked, "Can you ask Hermione Granger, Theodore Nott, or both, to try and get me the homework I've missed?" Cormac blinked again. "Granger? Alright, but I'm only the messenger." He left.

"Mr. Potter, should I try and find one of your classmates and get your trunk? It might be easier." Harry winced. "Um...could a House-elf do it? I can at least trust one of them not to tamper with my things." Madam Pomfrey looked surprised. "Dappy?"

There was a CRACK, and a pink-skinned House-elf appeared. "Yes Madam Pomfrey, ma'am?"

"Um...could you go to the First Year Slytherin dorm and get my trunk? There's a password, it's 'Claw's Clan.'"

Madam Pomfrey looked up. "What? A password? It's not like your bed is warded." Harry was silent. "It is? How and Why?"

"I was raised by Daphne Dressler," he said by way of explanation. "And my roommates aren't that fond of me." Madam Pomfrey shook her head in dismay.

When Harry got out of the Hospital Wing, he found little had changed. His spill from the broom had become something of a joke among the Gryffindors. Ron Weasley enjoyed imitating Harry, to raucous laughter. Though, truth be told, the Weasley twins began to get a little sick of it. Harry guessed they had seen a few too many friends fall off their brooms, especially after being hit by Bludgers. Hermione looked disgusted with the whole thing, something that made Harry feel a bit better.

But with his return to classes, something else returned. Something that haunted him every time that Halloween began to draw close: Nightmares.

They varied greatly in detail, but the ending was the same. A series of muffled yells, and tortured screams. A muffled, two-word incantation, repeated three times, growing steadily louder in volume as they increased in number. In other words, the castor was drawing closer. Harry knew he hadn't actually seen the events of October 31st, 1981, but that didn't stop his mind from filling in the blanks. He imagined his mother and father on their knees, begging for their lives. He imagined a cloaked, dark figure cruelly snuffing out their young lives with a jet of green light.

And with them both dead, he imagined looking down upon their faces, frozen in pain and shock, their eyes dead to the world, as were all victims of the Avada Kedavra Killing Curse. He imagined the castor standing over him, a defenseless baby, and incanting the Curse. He felt pain rip through his scar, and let out a scream. The only thing he would see before there was a blazing flash of green light, and Harry woke suddenly, a scream in his throat.

He sat up in bed, drenched in cold sweat. His heat was racing, and his scar burned duly. Harry closed his eyes and took a shaky breath, trying to calm himself. He suddenly felt the deep urge to relieve himself, as well as potentially empty the contents of his stomach. He unlocked the hangings with a muttered, "Lily Evans," and stepped to the ground, shaking badly. He staggered into the loo, his feet freezing on the cold dungeon floor.

After a long, hot shower, Harry dressed and headed upstairs to the Great Hall. He stepped through the entrance way, and found it entirely deserted. Harry found a good reason on his watch: it was five-thirty in the morning. Unnatural exhaustion suddenly overtook him, and for some reason, Harry found that he didn't want to return to the Slytherin Common Room for the hour and a half that remained until Breakfast. His head suddenly felt like it weighed several tons, and he lowered it to the table. His vision narrowed, and he fell into the blackness.

Harry was later awoken by a concerned looking Professor McGonagall, who seemed disturbed to find the eleven year old sleeping in the Great Hall. Harry insisted that he was fine, and looked around to see a number of students staring at him.

Beautiful.

The day passed uneventfully, though Harry, for the first time in a long time, nearly found himself reduced to tears at several points during the day. The Gryffindors added his nap in the Great Hall as to the list of taunts they bombarded him with, and Malfoy point-blank threatened Harry that if he lost another Quidditch match, he wouldn't be riding a broom again. Despite his best reason, the threat filled him with fear and apprehension.

Harry quickly discovered that one of the reasons that the school was laughing at his fall was that they believed he had tried some crazy stunt, become a sitting duck, and then got hit with the Bludger. No one seemed concerned with the fact that a state-of-the-art broom jerking and jolting uncontrollably wasn't exactly normal. This added to Harry's mounting fears that he wasn't going to survive to see his twelfth birthday.

In fact, the only person that seemed to believe in the possibility of Harry's broom being jinxed was oddly enough the man who had threatened to give him a year's worth of detentions if he didn't put every ounce of effort into winning: Snape. Harry wasn't sure how he knew, but it was the only logical solution for how he didn't mention the fall at all during Potions. Indeed, he pretended Harry didn't exist for

the entire class period. A good thing, because the stress and feelings of isolation and fear had him close to snapping.

That night, Harry lay wide awake on his bed, staring into the darkness. His mind was racing, and despite the utter exhaustion he was feeling during the day, his body seemed to be tingling with energy. Harry felt like he was being swamped by negative emotions, and he knew one thing: he needed to get out.

Opening the curtains, he slipped on some slippers, threw on a robe over his pajamas, and headed for the common room. However, the same oppressive atmosphere in the dorms filled the common room as well. Harry cast silencing charms on his feet, and decided to do something that had he been in a better state of mind, he would have known was incredibly stupid: he decided to go for a walk after curfew. Harry walked out of the hidden stone archway and set off.

Harry decided that walking right through the Entrance Hall was risky, and decided to use one of the hidden passageways he'd found that led up a stone staircase several floors to the fourth floor corridor, more specifically, the library. When Harry was trying to avoid Malfoy, Weasley, and in general, any other human beings, it was quite convenient.

Ducking around a pillar, listening intently for any signs of his Potions Master or Filch and his cat. He hurried, his footsteps silent, over to the innocent looking pillar, and ducked behind it. Next, he tapped a section of the pillar with his wand, and with a quiet grating of stone against stone, a section of wall slid open, revealing a lit passage and a stone spiral staircase. Harry quickly ducked inside, and the door closed quietly. Harry moved quickly up the stairs, an exhausting climb from the dungeons to the fourth floor. He reached the exit, and tapping another brick, a slightly narrower door opened. Harry stepped out of the passage, glancing around. He started for the library.

As he walked down the corridor, a partially opened door leading to a lighted room caught his attention. Somehow, he was being drawn to it. He glanced around again, and hurried into the room. It was empty, except for a huge, ornate mirror that was almost as tall as the ceiling.

Above the reflective surface was an inscription: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.*

Latin? Harry wondered.

Out of sheer curiosity more than anything else, Harry stepped in front of the mirror...and froze, his breath caught in his chest.

Rather than his own reflection, Harry saw six figures standing in the mirror. Two women, two boys, and two men. Harry spun around, somehow believing for an instant that what the reflection showed was true. But there was nothing but an empty room.

He spun back around, and stared at the six people in the mirror.

One was, obviously, himself. He appeared much as his did at the present time: dressed in black Hogwarts robes with a Slytherin crest, messy black hair, and vibrant green eyes framed by round glasses. He was shorter than average, and his knobby knees were obvious in his posture. His forehead was unmarked, and his eyes were full of childish glee and innocence. He was beaming up at the two figures standing behind him, sparing an occasional glance at one of the other figures. His left arm was around the shoulders of a boy that Harry had never seen in his life. Still, Harry knew exactly who he was.

He was slightly taller than Harry, with distinctive facial features, neatly trimmed honey-blond hair, and pale blue eyes, full of innocence and mischief all at once. He also had his arm around Harry, though his attention was focused on the man and woman standing behind him.

His mother was beautiful, her unblemished face youthful and full of energy and vitality. She wore beautiful emerald green robes that brought out the color of her grey-green eyes and contrasted well with her shoulder length honey-blond hair. Her left hand was clasped in the hand of the man standing beside her, and her attention, mostly riveted on her son and husband would occasionally drift to Harry, and then, to the woman that stood behind him.

The man had boyish features, as if he had never truly accepted the fact that his childhood was over. His short brown hair and pale blue eyes were complemented by a neatly trimmed goatee. He was

beaming down at his son, exchanging the occasional loving glance with his wife.

Daphne and Edmond Dressler, with their unnamed son that they never had the chance to bring into the world. A boy who was like a brother to Harry.

His attention shifted to the woman standing behind him, her hand on his shoulder. She was of medium height and slender build, with beautiful auburn hair that ran down her back. Her eyes were an almond-shaped green, the same eyes that Harry saw every time he looked into the mirror.

The man was taller than his wife, and had the same ever-messy, jet black hair that adorned the head of his son. His hazel eyes, framed by wire-frame glasses, were full of love and pride, and his hand was currently mussing up Harry's already messy hair, while his son gave a lighthearted scowl. Both father and son dissolved into laughter, while mother looked on with amusement, nudging Daphne to get her attention.

Harry watched, tears beginning to form in his eyes, as Daphne and Lily pulled their sons into a warm embrace, before James and Edmond picked up their sons, spun them in the air, and set them back down. The two boys, both Slytherins, pulled each other into a friendly hug.

Silent tears began to stream down Harry's face as the emotions of his entire stay at Hogwarts began to crash into him, all at once. The floodgates opened, and Harry sat back down on the ground, hard, as he wept for the family he would never have.

Minerva McGonagall patrolled the corridors of Hogwarts after dark. It was not an enviable task, but a rather interesting one, when one considered the wide variety of activities students engaged in out of the dorms after curfew. So far, however, she hadn't caught anyone this term, though the year was young. Minerva boarded one of the moving staircases in the central antechamber that led up to all of the floors in the center of the castle, and it moved silently up to the fourth floor.

This was not usually a place that one found students, after all, only the most desperate would sneak out after dark to visit the library. There weren't any accessible broom cupboard for couples either. Still, she began walking down the fourth-floor corridor when her cat-enhanced ears caught a faint sound, and she stopped. It was coming from a partially open door. *Wasn't that where Albus put the...?*

Yes, it was.

She hurried over toward the door, and slowly stepped in the room, taking a deep breath and preparing to raise her voice. But her reprimand died in her throat as she gazed at the scene in the room. More specifically, the lone figure sobbing quietly in front of the massive Mirror of Erised.

It was Harry Potter. The boy that she had to admit she hadn't really taken a liking to since the boy had been Sorted into Severus's house. The boy who appeared stoic and composed, unusually so for an eleven-year old. But the state of the boy at the present was shocking.

Harry was rocking back and forth, his knees drawn up to his chest. He didn't at all notice Minerva's presence. Instead, his attention was drawn to the mirror. Minerva knew a bit about it, and while she had never looked into it, considering the boy's past, his most heartfelt desire was likely to be a rather powerful one.

"Mr. Potter?" she asked quietly. The boy jerked violently, staring her at confusion, before his eyes grew wide with fear. Tears glistened on his face. "Professor?" he gasped.

"What are you doing here? You know that it is after curfew."

Harry hung his head in shame. "I...just needed to get out..."

"Are you alright, Mr. Potter?" Minerva wasn't sure she had the heart to punish the distraught boy. The rumors she'd heard about him and her own assumptions were shattering before her very eyes. She felt a sudden need to comfort the boy, which she shook off. That would *not* be proper.

Harry shook his head. "Please...let me go back...please don't take points. Detention's fine, just no points..."

"I should take points, Mr. Potter. You do know the rules. And I should speak to your Head of House." Harry stiffened at that.

"No...please don't," he begged weakly, looking at least five years younger than he was. Minerva never could have imagined this. She'd found the boy fast asleep on one of the House tables the previous morning, but passed it off as typical exhaustion, or perhaps a bad dream. *But what the boy would be having nightmares about could hardly be considered naturally?*

"Why not?" she asked instead. She knew Harry wasn't the most popular person in Slytherin, though she figured his performance in Quidditch, even if he had lost the game, in addition to his fame might have netted him some companions.

"Because...they hate me already," he finally got out. "If you take points..." Minerva understood exactly what the boy was saying. "Have you not discussed this with Severus?"

Harry looked at her as if she'd grown an extra head. Then he gave a cold, harsh, mirthless laugh, more like a bark than anything else. "*Snape?* The man *detests* me! Bring my *personal issues* to *Snape*?" He gave another barking laugh, then quieted, suddenly realizing who he was talking to.

"Are you to tell me you have *no one*?" she asked in disbelief. How could the Boy-Who-Lived be despised by his peers? The boy was a legend!

"No one on this continent. Not until Hermione actually—" he broke off.

"Miss Granger?" she asked. Harry nodded. "Seemed pretty nice. Unfortunately, Weasley has made her think I'm Voldemort reincarnate," he said in a dead-sounding voice, with a hint of bitterness.

Minerva shuddered at the use of You-Know-Who's name, and was surprised that an eleven year old used it so freely. She supposed that

Daphne must have taught him not to fear the name, but the person. That sounded like her. Still, she was shocked by the way the boy was talking. How could she have missed this?

Because you are still disappointed that he isn't in your house, her inner conscience reminded her. She suddenly felt ashamed. She took a deep breath; she would need to have a conversation with Dumbledore.

"Harry," she said, using his first name, "Due to your situation, I'll excuse your presence here. But you must leave now, and not return."

Harry nodded, and pulled himself to his feet, swiping at his eyes, before turning, and with one glance back at the mirror, he slowly walked away, not even acknowledging Minerva's presence.

When he was gone, Minerva slumped against the wall, the full weight of what she had just discovered, along with the guilt for not recognizing it sooner, crashed down upon her. She desperately hoped the boy wouldn't encounter Filch on the way back to his dormitory.

A/N: So here's Chapter 6. Things really start to heat up here, and and I believe this is a slight more interesting than what happened in canon. JKR saved the fall from a broom for PoA.

Response to Reviewers:

The wizarding world knows about Harry's scar by means of a CPD (Convenient Plot Device). In Chapter 2, Daphne mentions how the ward of Godric's Hollow photograph anyone who enters or exits them. I assume that someone in the Order had to have leaked the details of Harry's state and the Fall of the Dark Lord to the wizarding world in canon (cough Drunk Hagrid cough). Because Daphne was the first to reach Harry, and I couldn't exclude the whole scar thing (it identifies him, and plays a crucial role in his character development; it makes him different from everyone else, though he goes from finding it enjoyable to finding it quite annoying), I needed another way. It's stupid, I know, but I didn't have a choice.

Thanks to everyone who read and reviewed.

Chapter 7: Trouble with Trolls

Harry had originally intended to follow his Transfiguration professor's order to stay away from the Mirror of Erised. But soon found that impossible. He was unusually unfocused in his classes, and every time he closed his eyes, he saw the image of his loving family. The emotions he had felt that night had returned tenfold. He *had* to go back.

And so he did. Every night for over a week, he snuck out of the Slytherin dormitory, unseen and unheard, and climbed up the hidden staircase to the fourth floor corridor. Twice since McGonagall first caught him, the door had been locked, though he was undeterred. A simple *Alohamora* Unlocking Charm solved the problem.

And he would slip into the door, closing it quietly behind him, and then drag one of the unused chairs from where it had been shoved against the wall, and sit there, gazing at his parents and the Dresslers. The comfort the images provided was amazing. Seeing himself loved and protected evoked only happy emotions. He would sit there and watch them interact until his eyelids began to droop, when he would replace the chair, silently open the door, and sneak back down to the Slytherin dormitories. Then he would sneak into his bed, where his only dreams would be those filled with love and affection. No nightmares disturbed his rest. When he would awake, he would feel better than he ever had during his time at Hogwarts.

It was four days before Halloween, a night that had more negative significance to Harry than any other person in Hogwarts, that he was finally discovered again. Harry had just sat down, and was watching his father pat him on the shoulder and say something that made his reflection beam with pride, when a voice called out from behind him.

“Back again, Harry?”

Harry spun around, nearly falling off the chair, staring back to see who had found him. He saw Albus Dumbledore standing off near the chairs, staring at Harry with his eyes twinkling madly. When he saw the desperation in Harry's eyes, the twinkle faded a bit.

"Sir..." Harry began weakly. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen Dumbledore standing in the corner.

"It's alright, Harry," he said kindly, approaching slowly. "I won't take House points, given your situation. But I must ask: Why did you come back?"

Dumbledore was disturbed by the look in the youth's eyes. It was one of desperate longing, a look of someone who had fully fallen into the Mirror's influence. Albus knew he had to break him out.

"I...I had to see them again...I had to..." he said. Dumbledore's heart sank. *If the mirror has already begun to eat at his sanity...*

"Harry, I know that it is difficult for you. But you must break free of the mirror's hold. Do you know what this mirror is?" Harry shook his head.

"It is called the Mirror of Erised. Do you know what it shows?"

"I show not your face, but your heart's desire," Harry read smoothly. Dumbledore smiled. "Very good. What do you see, Harry?"

"I see...Lily, James, Daphne, Edmond, their...son, and...me," he said, in wonder. "Dad's ruffling my hair...he does that a lot. And he's proud of me...he doesn't care that I'm Slytherin. Daphne's son is Slytherin too...now Lily and Daphne are giving us a hug."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Dumbledore smiled. "Harry, you do know...what you see can never happen? There is no spell that can reawaken the dead." Harry's smile didn't fade. "I know. But watching them makes me feel better than I have since I left her."

"But Harry, the Mirror is a very powerful magical object. Men have gone mad, wasting away as they wondered whether what they saw was real, or even possible. You must break the hold it has over you. Only one of those you see is still alive. Remember your mother, your father, Edmond, and the Dressler boy, but focus on what you have."

Harry spun around, fury in his eyes. "*What I have? What I have is on the other side of the bloody Atlantic!*"

"You have no friends that you can speak with?" Dumbledore was sure that Minerva was mistaken.

"No, sir," the boy ground out.

"I see. Harry, has Daphne mentioned Hagrid in the course of your correspondence?" Harry nodded.

"The man doesn't seem to like me much. Probably thinks I'm a slimy Slytherin and an insult to my parents' memories. It's what they all think, 'cept me and Daphne. She told me that *all* the houses are good. HA!"

Harry gave a cold, barking laugh. Dumbledore's eyes widened in alarm. In his own way, the boy was as bitter as Riddle had been. And both had carefully constructed facades to hide their emotions.

I must write Daphne. This is alarming indeed. If the boy turns to the Dark Arts...

"Harry, you *must* not return to this Mirror. It will be moved tomorrow, and I want you to *swear* to me that you will not go looking for it again." Dumbledore hadn't actually planned to move the mirror for quite a while, but he had to remove the temptation.

"Fine," he hissed through his teeth. Then he angrily turned to go, his eyes locked on the mirror.

"*Harry!*" Albus said, slightly louder. The boy stopped, and his anger vanished, replaced by shame and a touch of fear.

"Please, swear it."

"I swear I won't," he said in an honest, but dead sounding voice. He walked out the door slowly, leaving his Headmaster staring after him, shaking his head. Albus conjured a large white sheet, and flung it over the mirror, then he locked the door and warded it.

Unfortunately, with an end to the visits to the Mirror of Erised came the return of the nightmares. It was now an everyday occurrence for

Harry to be wake up at 4 o'clock in the morning, drenched in cold sweat, feeling like he'd run a marathon. Harry's work in class was suffering from his lack of sleep, and the exhaustion left him with a haggard appearance, dark lines under his eyes.

To make matter worse, the day after Dumbledore had discovered him with the mirror, he had forgotten to reinforce the Silencing Charms around his bed. He'd woken up screaming, awoken his entire dorm, and been slugged twice in the stomach by Goyle (on Malfoy's orders, of course). His ribs were still sore.

And so exhausted, wanting nothing more than to go back to his life before Hogwarts, before all of the isolation and the loneliness, Harry finally decided to go down to Hagrid's hut, to see if the man might behave more favorably in a person-to-person conversation.

He was wandering through the corridors, hoping to find someone both out of class and also having a knowledge of the grounds. Unfortunately, he spotted only a pair of redheads. A pair of redheads who had been springing pranks on Harry most of the year, though the worst thing they involved was dumping a bucket of lake water on his head as he entered the Great Hall. Hermione Granger had actually showed him a spell to siphon off water later that day, before she had lost her nerve and left him alone in the library. The two redheads were furtively hiding in an alcove, speaking in hushed tones. Harry guessed they were plotting their next prank.

"Oi! Fred, George!" Harry called over. The twins looked up, and their eyes narrowed. "What do you want, Potter?" Fred asked.

"Do you know how to get down to Hagrid's?"

"Why would a slimy Slytherin like you want to know? Want to torment the man?" George asked. Harry noticed his hand was in his robe pocket. Despite their antics, they were more than capable wizards, in fact, they were probably two of the brightest in the school. They just used their talents in...other ways. Harry privately thought they might give Zonko's a run for their money when they graduated.

"No interest in that. I want to talk to him," Harry said, trying not to let his impatience show. Still, how the Gryffindors could assume he was a lackey of Malfoy just baffled him.

"About what?" Fred asked, coming closer.

"None of your business," Harry snapped, finally losing his temper. "Where is it? You can hex me if I do *anything*! Just tell me!"

"Whoa, don't get your knickers in a twist, Potter! Know that bridge directly on a line from the main entrance?"

"Yeah. Is it down there?"

"Yeah, just keep going down, there's a path. No trouble, remember?"

"I remember," Harry said, turning to go. "Thanks," he called over his shoulder.

Harry trudged down a muddy path on a rainy Wednesday afternoon down toward the home of the Hogwarts Gamekeeper. The small, one room hut had smoke coming out of a damaged-looking chimney and was surrounding by several different pens for roosters and cows. Harry saw a few owls perched on logs near the pumpkin patch. He walked up the steps, and knocked twice on the door. There was an excited barking from inside, along with a grunted, "Back, Fang, back."

Hagrid pulled the door open, and his eyes narrowed when he saw a Slytherin standing there. Even when he recognized Harry, he didn't move. Then he slammed the door shut in Harry's face. Harry took a deep breath, fighting back tears at the rejection, and knocked again. Hagrid yanked the door open and growled, "What d'ya want, Potter?"

"To talk with you," Harry said, letting the desperation he was feeling seep into his voice. He stood there, waiting. Something seemed to click in the large man's mind, and he stood aside. "C'mon in."

Harry walked into the cabin and stood aside so that Hagrid could pass him. Hagrid wandered over to his very large bed and sat down. Harry took a seat on a stool near the fire. Fang wandered over to him

and gave a contented growl as Harry absently scratched the boarhound behind the ears.

"Well if Fang likes ya, ya can't be that bad," Hagrid said. Harry didn't respond. "So why are ya down 'ere Potter?"

"No "Arry" this time?" Harry asked, still not meeting the large man's eyes.

"What d'ya want?" he said gruffly.

"Like I said outside, to talk with you," Harry said, meeting Hagrid's eyes for the first time.

"Now why would ya wanna talk ter me?" Hagrid asked sarcastically.

Harry's temper flared. "Would you rather I leave? Do you think I'm just a no-good, slimy, Slytherin insult to my parents' memories too?"

Hagrid seemed taken aback. "I just heard things—"

"Lies. You've heard vicious lies and rumors spread by gits like Weasley who have been making my life a living hell because I wear a different bloody badge!" Harry yelled, his frustration boiling over.

Hagrid seemed ashamed. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said quietly. "Seems like you've been having a rough go of it."

"Quite," Harry snapped, then softened his tone, "Sorry Hagrid, it's just that no one had given me a fair chance. The Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs either hate me or are scared of me because of my badge, and the Slytherins hate me because of my past. It's...difficult."

"I can imagine. I'm really sorry, 'Arry. So why did'ya come 'ere anyway?"

"Like I've said three times, to talk to you. Because everybody has told me to." Hagrid looked confused. "Why and who?"

"Daphne and Professor McGonagall. They both thought you were someone I ought to reach out to. It's not like I have a list of people to talk with anyway."

"Don't'ya have any friends?"

Harry gave a barking laugh. "You know, you are the third person to ask me that exact question in the past week. The answer was, and still is, no." Harry suddenly had a hunch he wanted to explore. "Has Hermione been around here?"

Hagrid's eyes narrowed. "Why do you want ter know?"

Harry sighed, "just asking. Nothing malicious, trust me. I don't have any other potential friends to drive away."

Hagrid nodded. "She's been comin' around, crying and such. Don't think she's got many friends either. You're not gonna make fun of 'er fer that, right?"

"I've done more than my share of crying over the last week," Harry said softly. Hagrid looked crestfallen. "Maybe you two should try ter get together."

Harry glanced up at him. "What does Hermione think I'm doing?"

"She reckons yer trying ter get homework help." Harry snorted. "It's not like I match or exceed her in every class but Charms or anything. Or potions, though Snape tries to sabotage me so it doesn't count. I just...I try to be nice to her, to get to know her, but she doesn't give me a chance. But she doesn't hate me, because she'll help me out on occasion, so..."

"I understand, 'Arry. That's frustratin'."

"Yeah," Harry sighed.

"Listen, 'Arry, I don't mind talking to yeh, but yeh gotta get back up to the school. Don't wanna be late for dinner!" Harry smiled weakly, and then got up to leave. "Yer welcome to come back anytime, 'Arry. Sorry for treating yeh so badly."

Despite Harry finally finding someone who would accept him for who he was, the nightmares returned with a vengeance. He began to imagine the night of Edmond's murder, only with Daphne's body added to those on the floor. Of course, being the night before Halloween, the 10th anniversary of his parents' murders, he dreamed of Lily's and James's last moments.

Harry slept very little that night, spending most of the time lying on his back, staring into the darkness, trying to slow his racing heart. He tried to go back to sleep each time, but simply ended up rolling around, wide awake. He finally managed to sleep the fourth time, but almost instantly fell into a nightmare. Exhausted, but still awake, Harry grabbed a book and went to the freezing cold common room to read.

Classes that day were like all the others. He did the absolute minimum in terms of classwork required, as he simply could not focus. He could barely read the blackboards, and lost fifteen points from Slytherin for melting Nott's cauldron (the boy commented that Harry would not have him as a partner again before he got a decent night's sleep), the only time that Snape had actually been justified taking points. He constantly missed his beetle in Transfiguration when trying to transform it into a button, and ended up crushing the beetle with his wand tip. McGonagall pulled him aside after class and asked him if he wanted to go to the Hospital Wing, but Harry said he was fine, even though a blind troll would know he was far from it.

After lunch, the afternoon class was cancelled because Professor Spout had taken ill. Harry was wandering around the halls aimlessly, trying to think of something other than the nightmares. He was failing miserably. As he approached the Charms corridor, the bell rang, and the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw First Year Charms Class got out. Harry was about to turn away, not wanting to give Hermione the impression he was stalking her, when he heard her and Weasley's voices.

It sounded like Weasley was yelling at her, or at least talking loudly about her. There was a loud snuffle, and Hermione tore through the crowd past them, and down the stairs where Harry was standing.

Harry saw she had tears in her eyes, and was likely going to the bathroom to have a good cry. He glared at Weasley as he passed.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Ron demanded.

"Wandering aimlessly, not a crime, is it?" Harry responded truthfully.

Ron scoffed. "Like a Slytherin ever does that, c'mon Seamus." The sandy-haired boy glared at Harry as he passed, and Harry collapsed into the wall. He stood there for several minutes.

"Are you alright, my boy?" Flitwick asked. Harry glanced up. "Bad memories," he responded.

Flitwick sighed. "Yes, I suppose today would do that to you. Well, the Halloween Feast should cheer you up, right?" he said hopefully. Harry shook his head. "I'm not going. No reason to." Then he walked away, and headed for the library.

Harry arrived just as all the other students were leaving to go to the feast. Harry wandered over to the *Combat Spells and Curses* section, which contained very few books as most tomes on the subject contained Dark Arts and were banned. Harry picked out a few books. He had been doing some reading and found two spells he wanted to work on. The *Reducto* Blasting Curse and the *Percutio* Striking Curse. If he had time, he wanted to research more powerful Shielding Spells. He'd become proficient with the standard *Protego*, but he knew the spell could be modified to be more powerful, and that other such spells existed, though they might be too complicated for an eleven-year old to cast.

Harry glanced around to be sure that no one was watching him, and then carried his books over to one of the armchairs where Hermione frequently sat. He saw Madam Pince come around the corner, levitating books back to their places. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the feast?"

Harry shrugged. "Just wanted to do some reading. Not very hungry." Madam Pince nodded. "Very well, keep quiet and no practicing those spells in here. It makes noise and you might damage the books."

Harry opened the copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Combat Magic*, and flipped the table of contents open. He found the section labeled 'Blasting Hex/Curse,' and flipped it open.

Blasting Hex/Curse

Incantation: Re-duc-to

The effects of this curse vary based upon the target and the power of the spell. The curse only affects solid objects. The most common effect is causing physical damage to the target. This spell can be lethal when used improperly.

Harry spent a great deal of time reading over the details and history of the spell before trying his hand at the wand movements. He was confident he'd be able to get it with a bit of practice. He moved onto the striking curse.

Harry spent over an hour reading that book, reading up on both spells before re-reading the sections. He began to think about going down to the Slytherin dorms when Madam Pince's voice cut in, "I'm going down to get myself a bite to eat, so the library is closing. If you want to check out those books, do it now." Harry handed her the book he was reading and she checked it out while he put the others back.

Feeling exhausted all of a sudden, Harry waited until Madam Pince was out of sight before tapping his wand on an innocent-looking brick, opening the staircase to the dungeons. He quickly climbed inside and descended. Harry exited the entrance and began to walk back toward the common room. Suddenly, he was assaulted by a horrid smell.

Then, Harry heard a petrifying scream.

Harry raced around the corner, wand out, and stopped when he saw himself looking at the back of a massive mountain troll. It was tall, with arms as thick as Hagrid's legs, its small head contrasting violently with the massive frame. It wore only a filthy loincloth, and was holding a massive wooden club the size of a small car. Through the smelly creature's legs, he saw Hermione, her red-rimmed eyes (she had obviously been crying) widened in terror, backed in a wall,

frozen. The troll raised its club, and she raised her hands as if to fight off the blow.

Harry reacted without thinking. Raising his wand and focusing on what he had just learned, he barked, "*Percutio!*" A purple beam of light struck the troll in the back, and while the hide was far too thick for the weak effort to cause it any pain, the troll stopped drawing back its club, and slowly, dumbly, turned around to see what had just hit it.

Harry was frozen there, pondering his own stupidity, incriminating wand extended.

The troll roared and brought its club up. Harry dove to the side, landing hard just in time to avoid being crushed by the impact. Harry ran away from the next blow and yelled as loud as he could, "HERMIONE! GO AND GET HELP!"

But the Muggleborn girl just stood there, looking on in terror. Harry realized he had to delay the thing before help could arrive. He couldn't beat the troll on his own; even with the magic he knew he wasn't strong enough to break through the troll's hide. Harry rolled away from another blow, Seeker reflexes taking over.

He stopped for a moment to incant the Blasting Curse, his wand aimed at the troll's feet. That was his first, and last, mistake.

The club came out of the corner of Harry's eye and slammed into his right side. Harry heard bones crunch and felt terrible pain before he crashed into the wall. More cracking and crunching noises were heard and Harry's body was flooded with piercing agony. He let out a shriek of pain and collapsed, desperately fighting to retain consciousness. Hermione let out a shriek, and then another as the troll raised its club for a killing blow.

"*STUPEFY!*" half-dozen voices shouted. The red beams combined into one solid mass, and slammed into the back of the troll. Six spells did what one could not, and the troll collapsed forward, the head landing at Harry's feet, where he lay gasping in pain in a growing pool of his own blood. His vision was beginning to get blurry, but he could make out the horrified faces of Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall,

Flitwick, Sprout, Sinistra, and Vector. Hermione was leaning against a wall for support, her face white.

“*Harry!*” she gasped. That seemed to unfreeze everyone else. The Professor’s raced towards him, stepping all over the unconscious troll.

Just then, Snape hobbled into the corridor, limping badly. “*What is going on here! POTTER!*” he bellowed.

McGonagall rounded on him. “Not now, Severus, the boy is badly hurt.” She conjured a stretcher, and Flitwick levitated him onto it.” The brief flicker of pain that Harry felt was still enough to cause him to whimper. His broken bones felt like they were on fire, and his body ached.

“What in Merlin’s name were you *doing, Potter?*” Snape asked, though surprisingly, a hint of concern came through.

“I didn’t know,” Harry mumbled, “just...in library.”

Dumbledore looked him over with concerned eyes. “We must get him to Madam Pomfrey. Minerva? Fillius?” The two nodded and hurried for the Hospital Wing, pulling Harry’s floating stretcher. Hermione began to run after them.

“Miss Granger, are you injured?” Dumbledore asked, knowing the answer.

Hermione shook her head, her eyes fixated on the now unconscious boy. “No, but I have to go with him! He saved my life!”

“Miss Granger-“ McGonagall began, but Hermione would have none of it. “Please, let me go with him! I won’t be a bother!”

Minerva sighed and relented, “Alright, come along then, we have to hurry.”

When they were gone, Albus sent Pomona and Richard off to check on the students, and called over to his Potions master. “Severus?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” he replied icily.

"What have you to report? And why are you limping?" Dumbledore asked, though he had an idea.

"Someone tried to test the Stone's defenses. He was wearing a cloak so I couldn't identify him. Hagrid's bloody mongrel nearly killed me," Snape spat, as if the worst possible death he could imagine was being consumed by an extremely rare Cerberus.

"Interesting. I had not expected Voldemort to find a way so quickly. Am I to assume that Quirrinus was unaccounted for?" he asked.

Snape shook his head. "I don't know, but my Mark burns when I am around him. How can you let this go on, Albus? He is obviously in league with the Dark Lord!"

"I fear it is too late for poor Quirrinus, Severus," Dumbledore said sadly. "But he has not yet revealed himself, nor brought harm upon another student."

Snape snorted. "You know as well as I his affinity with trolls. Does nearly killing the Boy-Who-Lived not count as 'harm'?"

Dumbledore was silent. "I must say, his motives are questionable. But I must know more before I act. Lord Voldemort can strike in many ways."

Snape snorted again, "Don't expect me to clean this up when it explodes in your face."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I would not expect you to. Goodnight Severus, though I suggest someone look at that wound. Not Poppy, as she might recognize the source. Argus has some medical expertise."

"Very well, I'll see the Squib tomorrow. Good hunting, Headmaster."

"*How is he?*" Hermione asked excitedly as Madam Pomfrey emerged from the ward. Madam Pomfrey shook her head, washing the boy's blood off her hands and clothing with a spell.

"Not good. Broken bones galore, severe and deep bruising, and he went into shock. He'll *probably* survive the night, after which the recovery can begin. A bloody *troll*, honestly!" the matron swore. Hermione felt a cold sweat break out on her forehead.

"What do you mean, *probably*? He *could* die!" Hermione demanded.

The mediwitch sighed. "He's in bad shape, though my *guess* is he'll recover." She straightened. "What *are* you doing here anyway?"

McGonagall answered. "She is leaving to go back to the dormitories."

"No! I want to stay with Harry! He saved my life, I want to thank him when he wakes up!" Hermione said. She *couldn't* leave her...*friend* here. *I'll never forgive myself if he doesn't make it.*

"That won't be for a while. He'll be out for a few days at the very least." Madam Pomfrey said, pouring a potion out of a bottle and into a goblet.

"...or never," Hermione said sadly. McGonagall paled. "What?"

"Best not to dwell on that, dears," Madam Pomfrey said as she tipped Harry's head back, opened his mouth, and poured a potion down his throat. "Blood-Restorative," she said, answering their unspoken questions.

"Poppy, perhaps Miss Granger should..." Minerva began, mindful of the state of her favorite student.

"Absolutely not, Minny," Poppy said, absently brushing back the hair on her patient's sweaty forehead, revealing the bright red scar. Just as quickly, she covered it back up, before walking over to the potions cabinet again, "she'll accomplish nothing here but get in the way. Sorry dear, but that's the reality of it," she said, getting another potion out and checking her watch. "Strengthening Drought."

"Alright then. Miss Granger?" Hermione tore her eyes from the unconscious form of the boy who had saved her life. "Alright," she said miserably.

The two exited the Hospital Wing. As they ascended on one of the moving staircases, Minerva voiced the question that had been bothering her. “I wasn’t aware you thought much of Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger. *The boy had mentioned her, after all, and not in a positive sense.*

“I...he saved my life. And...I think he’s been trying to befriend me, and I told him to sod off. Excuse the language, Professor.” Hermione’s voice was downcast and her tone that of misery.

“I see. And he persisted in his efforts?”

“Yes, I...I think he was as lonely as I was, and I was one of the only people to ever be nice to him.”

“I know that was the case. He told me as much.”

“He told *you*?” Hermione said incredulously. “But-but you’re the Head of Gryffindor House. Why would he talk about things like that with you?” Hermione demanded. *It was strange*, Minerva admitted.

“The particulars of our conversation aren’t up for discussion. However, the fact remains that the boy has been friendless from the day he arrived here.” Hermione looked horrified.

“*He said that! He told me that!...and I ignored him!* God I’m so awful!” Hermione whispered. McGonagall put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “It’s alright, Miss Granger. If-“

“No! It’s *all* my fault, if I had just listened to him and not to all those lies. Neither one of us would have been down there! He’d be okay!” Hermione said, stopping as she buried her face in her hands. Minerva stopped and squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sure that it will be alright, Miss Granger. If you two become friends, I’m sure he’ll forgive you. I think he’s desperate for companionship.”

“Alright,” she said, sniffling. “I’ll find my way back, Professor.” They had reached the seventh floor landing.

“Very well, Miss Granger. If you so desire, you may visit Mr. Potter.”

If he's still alive, Hermione thought miserably.

Hermione entered the Dormitory to find that the enthusiasm from the feast hadn't faded much. Student were sitting in small groups, eating and talking loudly. Some of the prefects, including Percy Weasley, were trying to control the situation, but were failing miserably. Part of it was because Percy's twin brothers, Fred and George, appeared to have distributed a large number of joke products that were causing all kinds of havoc.

Hermione, her heart heavy and her mind racing, wandered over toward the dormitories. Ron Weasley, who was talking loudly about the troll with Neville Longbottom, Dean Thomas, and Seamus Finnegan was sitting on the bottom stair of the staircase leading to the girls' dorms. The discussion centered on what the troll would have done to some of the slimy Slytherins. When Harry's name was mentioned, she nearly lost it. *How can they talk about him like that?*

"Oi, Granger!" Weasley called over. "Didn't see you at the feast, was kinda worried about you. Where were you?"

"None of your business, Ronald," she snapped. Then Dean spoke up.

"Oi, Hermione, is that...*blood*?" Hermione looked down. Her right robe sleeve was drenched in Harry's blood, though she wasn't sure how that had happened. She had run over to him as he was being levitated out.

"Yes..." she replied weakly.

"Whose?...wait, you didn't, you know..." Seamus asked, looking concerned. Hermione was confused, then knew where he was going.

"Of course not," she snapped. "It's not mine," she admitted weakly. "Can you move? You are blocking the stairs?"

"Not yours? Then whose is it?" Ron asked quietly, not moving.

"Harry's...Now MOVE!" she yelled, desperate to get out of here.

"Why in Merlin's name is *Harry Potter's blood* on your robe sleeve?" Dean asked.

"Because he saved my life and got badly hurt by the troll! Happy now! It's what you *wanted*, wasn't it?" She shoved Ron roughly to the side and ran into the dormitories. She felt the tears begin to form in her eyes.

"*What!*" Daphne yelled, her shrill voice echoing in the ears of Albus Dumbledore. "*A mountain TROLL! That Harry FOUGHT! And he's in the Hospital Wing now!*"

Albus winced at the scarred woman's fury, which seemed to radiate even through the transcontinental-floo fire. He should have realized she would react this way to being informed about the near demise of the boy she considered her son.

"I want to come up there right *now!*" she yelled.

Albus shook his head. "You cannot, Daphne, you know the rules."

"What? Is Harry lying unconscious in the Hospital Wing not considered an 'emergency circumstance!'" Daphne raged. "I want to see my *son* now!" Albus realized he was correct based upon Daphne's choice of language. *She is so protective of the boy. Perhaps it would be best if she knew of the Prophecy. Else she might murder me if I waited until events had been set in motion.*

"Daphne, there is something I have neglected to tell you. Something about Harry that you must know before we go any further."

Daphne paled. "What?" Dumbledore didn't answer. "*TELL ME!*" she yelled, fear showing in her voice.

"Before Harry's birth, a Prophecy was given by our very own Sybil Trelawney..."

Daphne scoffed, "That old fraud?"

"Yes, the very same. As much of a fraud as she may be, there is a reason that I have kept her in my employ. For though she may not know it, she is more valuable to Lord Voldemort than anything else. Because she holds the key to his immortality."

Daphne was getting impatient. "*What the bloody hell does this have to do with my son!*"

Albus took a deep breath, and recited the Prophecy from memory.

...THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPORACHES...BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM...BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...AND THE DARK LORD SHALL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT...AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER...FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES...THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

Daphne had gone entirely pale, and was taking deep, shaky breaths. "*Please tell me that it isn't Harry, that it isn't true.*"

Albus sighed. "I cannot, for I would be lying. The scar that is upon his forehead is the 'mark' referred to. Lord Voldemort chose him, rather than the other possibility, Neville Longbottom..."

Daphne perked up, "Alice and Frank's son?"

"Indeed. But it is certain that he is not the Child of Prophecy. Lord Voldemort chose the one most like himself; he chose the half-blood over the pureblood...Are you alright Daphne?"

"Of course not, Albus. I've just been told that the most important person in my life is destined to confront the most evil and powerful wizards in magical history. *HOW COULD I POSSIBLY BE OKAY!*" she yelled, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

"*Why Harry...why did it have to be Harry...*" she mumbled into her hands.

Albus looked on in sympathy. "He has time yet. Still, the time draws closer that he will face his destiny for the first time. But he cannot know of this. You understand that."

"Of course I do!" Daphne said, insulted at being taken as an idiot, "He's a child, he cannot have such a weight placed on his shoulders. He'd have no childhood. But what can we do, Albus? What can I do?"

"We can only treat him as normally as possible. However, I fear destiny may interfere with our plans. He cannot be kept safe for long."

Daphne started. "Voldemort knows the Prophecy?" she asked. Albus shook his head. "He knows only what his spy told him, the first part. He knows that the child that could defeat him was born at the end of July, 1981. That is why he went to kill Harry that night."

"Who was the spy?" Daphne demanded.

Albus winced, then cursed himself for his indiscretion. Of course she would want to know the identity of the one whose information led to the death of James and Lily. And left Harry an orphan. "I cannot say, Daphne."

"You know," she said matter-of-factly. "You know, he or she is still alive, and you are protecting them. Because you know that as soon as I find out, I *will* kill him, Azkaban be damned."

Albus gave a weak smile. "You always were brilliant, Daphne. Alas, I cannot tell you for those reasons."

"I was the best Auror of my generation for a reason, Albus. Attending only a few months of Auror School before being thrown onto the front lines isn't typical."

"Indeed, it is not. Would you like to visit Harry when he awakes?"

"Yes," she said through the tears, sniffling slightly. "I would very much like to. Thank you for telling me Albus. I had to know..."

"Goodnight, Daphne. I will send word as soon as I know."

"Goodnight, Albus," Daphne said weakly. The Hogwarts Headmaster's head vanished, and Daphne stood there silently, staring into the fire. Then she weakly walked over to her favorite chair and collapsed, burying her head in her hands.

Then she wept.

A/N: Your wish is my command. After the great response that this fic has gotten, I've decided to speed up my updating pace (after all, the story is already finished). I'm going to post 7 and 8 together. I'm not sure how the rest will go, but you'll get at least one new one everyday. Keep in mind I will NOT be able to do that with the sequel, as I'm only into the first chapter.

Well, you reviewers have raised some interesting comments and concerns. One of which was raised by Shadow496. It concerns my placement of Harry in Slytherin.

First, I want to get something straight. JKR does something by writing through the eyes of an emotionally stunted, affection-deprived, and impulsive young wizard orphan. EVERYTHING is colored by Harry's opinions and preconceptions. He was not Sorted in Gryffindor because he had heard from Ron Weasley, who has shown himself to be pretty damn ignorant and closed-minded, that all evil wizards come from Slytherin. As a result, Harry accepts the fact that all the Slytherins are manipulative one-dimensional characters with evil intentions. It shocks him to the bone when in HBP, he finds Draco Malfoy crying his eyes out in Myrtle's bathroom. Blaise Zabini, who has never done anything wrong to him, is probably the only Slytherin that is even mentioned without a negative context.

The values that the Sorting Hat looks for when searching for prospective Slytherins are cunning, resourcefulness, intelligence, and blood ancestry. The latter is the only explanation for how Crabbe and Goyle get in, when they are about as intelligent as a doorknob and rely completely on Draco Malfoy. Nowhere is being dark, manipulative, deceptive, etc. mentioned. My version of Harry will be showing his drastic differences from the canon Harry in this fic, but already, look at some of the things he's done. Rather than hexing

Malfoy or punching his lights out, he coldly threatened him and placed a reminder of the consequences of messing with him in the Malfoy heir's head. Warnings that take a little while for the spoiled ponce to pick up on. Harry is most definitely resourceful, both in canon and in this fic.

Almost every aspect of Harry's personality that makes him different in the books is a result of the Dursleys. His selflessness and 'saving people thing,' as Hermione so eloquently put it, is a result of being locked up in the cupboard and hoping for rescue, and also a feeling that his life means less than other people's, a sentiment that was likely pounded into his head by his relatives. His eagerness to please and major response to both criticism and praise is a result of a desperate search for acceptance from those who are his only remaining family, as ill-fated a quest as it may be. His disregard for the rules is a result of stomped-out rebellion. His closed nature, and his unwillingness to open up, is perhaps the biggest Dursley-created trait. They yelled at him when he cried (something that he never does in the books, likely because he taught himself not to), and wouldn't listen to his problems and offer solutions. Canon Harry isn't comfortable sharing his secrets because his subconscious remembers what happened when he did. I realize this is all speculation, but in my opinion, this is one possible explanation based on what we know about the Dursley's.

The point is, a different upbringing has almost unrecognizably changed Harry's personality. Dumbledore actually accomplished something, intentionally or not, by leaving Harry with his relatives. He turned him into a person to be used as a weapon, because he doesn't share his feelings, he has a sense of duty to those around him (especially those who have dared to befriend him; remember, Dudley drove away any possible friends), and he has great bravery and selflessness. That said, I don't believe Dumbledore is a manipulative bastard, I think he does truly care for Harry, but he's seen far too much, and tends to think about the big picture.

I'll answer individual reviews after the next chapter. I really hope this has resolved some questions.

Chapter 8: The Cerberus and the Dragon

Hermione Granger abruptly sat up from the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall during lunch, and began to gather her things. Ron tapped her on the shoulder, and with a mouth full of food, asked, “Wer ou goin ion?”

“Oh, *honestly*, Ron. Didn’t your mother ever tell you that was disgusting?”

Ron swallowed. “Sorry...So where *are* you going? You’ve been running off quite a bit, and you’re never in the library.”

“Why, have you checked?” Hermione asked.

Ron had the decency to blush. “Uh...we’ve just been looking for you.”

“It’s not *my* problem if you fail your classes, Ron. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to visit a friend.” She got up to leave, but Ron grabbed her arm. She glared at him.

“Visit? Friend?” Ron asked, confused. “What friend?”

She shook his hand off, and glared at him. “Harry Potter.”

“*What?* He’s a...a *Slytherin!*” Ron whispered. “Why-“

Hermione cut him off. “I don’t need to explain, Ronald. Let me go.” And with that, she turned and walked out of the Great Hall, leaving a number of thoroughly confused Gryffindor First Years.

Hermione boarded one of the moving staircases as she headed for the third floor. Harry had been unconscious for three days, and while he was going to live, it was unclear when he’d wake. She’d visited him every time she could; her conscience wouldn’t allow her to do anything less. She’d been having nightmares in which she just stood there, frozen, while the troll killed Harry. She still couldn’t believe she’d been unable to do anything. *I don’t deserve to be a Gryffindor. Harry’s braver than I am. The Hat was right, I should be a Ravenclaw...*

This is all my fault. Harry was reaching out to me and I rejected him. I was stupid enough to believe those terrible rumors that he was a Dark Wizard and a slimy Slytherin lackey of Draco Malfoy. It was so obvious that he was nothing of the sort. That's why he didn't always come to meals. That's why he was always alone...

She'd reached the Hospital Wing. She pushed the door open and stepped inside. Madam Pomfrey stepped out of her office. "Oh, it's you again. Take a seat if you must. It's your duty to get to class on time."

"Any improvement," she asked hopefully. Madam Pomfrey nodded. "He'll be awake soon, and he'll make a full recovery. I was able to save his arm, though it might be stiff for a while...and those bruises aren't going to heal easily. The ribs will also be sore." Hermione nodded, she'd been worried Harry might lose his left arm, which had been mangled by his impact with the wall.

She walked over to the chair at the boy's bedside and sat down, pulling out her Transfiguration Textbook. She smiled at him. "I've got fifteen minutes before class, so now would be a nice time to wake up, Harry," she said softly, chuckling to herself. She began to read.

"...c'mon Daph, let me sleep more..." a tired voice sounded from the bed. Harry shifted.

Hermione dropped the book. "*Harry?*"

A very tired looking green eye opened, then another. His forehead furrowed in confusion, and Hermione put his glasses on. He blinked. "Hermione?"

She nodded, then called over. "Madam Pomfrey! He's awake!"

The matron came bustling out of her office with a tray of potions. "What exactly am I going to do with you, Mr. Potter? Is one near-death experience not enough for you?" she asked jokingly, though Hermione could tell she hoped not to see him again. It was probably mutual.

"Dunno. Trouble seems to find me," Harry said weakly.

"Drink these," the mediwitch said, "all of them." Harry downed the potions one by one, and made a face. "Do Healing Potions have to taste so awful?"

"Yes, I afraid that any type of taste enhancer would ruin the potion or at least dilute it severely. I'll get you a glass of water," Madam Pomfrey said. She walked away.

"Harry, I'm so sorry for treating you so badly. I didn't believe you and I should have. I'm lonely too and I really screwed this up," Hermione said extremely fast.

Harry chuckled weakly. "Slow down, Hermione, I don't blame you. It was my fault for attacking the troll."

"No, it wasn't. You only did that to save me," Hermione insisted. *That was the reason, right?*

"Oh...yeah, well...um" Harry said. Hermione could tell he was trying to figure out a way to assign blame to neither of the them, and failing. "Well, I forgive you, Hermione," he said well naturally. "So, why exactly are you here, of all people?"

"Weren't you listening?" Hermione asked exasperatedly.

"First, you were talking extremely quickly. But I got the gist. Second, does this mean you want to be my friend?" he asked hopefully.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Harry, I would very much like to be your friend."

"Look out academic records of Hogwarts," Harry quipped. Hermione giggled, a sound she didn't often make. The bell rang.

"Well, I have to be off. If you want, I'll try to get you today's homework," she offered.

Harry nodded. "Thanks. I'm going to try and get some more sleep, so maybe Madam Pomfrey will let me out by tomorrow. Bye Hermione."

"Bye Harry," she said as she left. She felt better than she had in weeks.

The combination of the passing of Halloween and the fact that he was no longer alone, perhaps combined with Madam Pomfrey's sleeping potion, meant that Harry's sleep held no nightmares. He slept right through dinner, and awoke refreshed and energized. He sat up, and didn't feel any pain, though his ribs were sore and his arm felt stiff. Madam Pomfrey came in. "Awake, are you? How are you feeling?"

Harry shrugged. "Much better. I think I can go to classes. I am famished, though." His stomach gave a loud growl.

Madam Pomfrey felt his forehead, then ran a number of spells on Harry. She seemed satisfied with the results. "Alright, you are free to go. Don't come back for a while, alright?"

Harry nodded. "Yes ma'am."

Harry hurried into his dormitory, where his classmates were all asleep. He grabbed some robes and took a quick shower, then raced upstairs. Unfortunately, before he could complete his odyssey to the Great Hall, he found himself yanked by the arm into an empty classroom. He looked to who was dragging him and saw Hermione, who appeared to be bursting to tell him something. "Is there a reason you have further deprived me of badly needed nourishment, oh dear friend Hermione?" Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You have no *idea* what I was doing last night!" she began.

Harry couldn't resist. "Do I *want* to know?" he said smartly.

Hermione hit him in the arm. "Shut up. Do you want to know or not?"

"I suppose I do," Harry drawled lazily. Hermione was getting angry, and Harry hoped he wasn't giving her the wrong impression. "I'm just needling you, Hermione. I'm not like Malfoy."

"I know that. So, anyway, yesterday, Malfoy insulted Ron's father, because his family isn't very wealthy. Ron called his father a Death

Eater and ‘you-know-who’s lapdog’ if I can remember correctly.” Harry winced. “I know, not the brightest thing he’s ever done, is it? Anyway, Malfoy challenged him to a wizard’s duel in the Trophy Room at midnight.”

“He was bluffing,” Harry blurted. “I guarantee he tipped off Filch. It’s a win-win. If Ron shows up and get caught, he gets in trouble, if he doesn’t show up, he calls him a coward.”

“I know that *now*,” Hermione said impatiently. “So anyway, Ron nominated Neville, the poor boy, as his second (as if he needed one). They were waiting for midnight, and I tried to stop them, because if they got caught, they would lose so many points. Ron just told me to be quiet, and I was stupid enough to follow them out the entrance to the portrait. The um...F-...F-...What’s wrong with me?”

“Probably an enchantment that prevents you from giving away the location of your common room. It doesn’t really matter anyway.” Hermione nodded.

“So anyway, the F-...oh, the bloody portrait...”

“Language, Hermione,” Harry mock scolded.

“I though you were hungry,” Hermione shot back.

Harry stomach gave a loud growl, answering for him. “Famished. Continue.”

“So I was locked outside (Harry whistled). So anyway, all three of us went up to the Trophy Room and heard Filch waiting for us. We took off, got down to the Third Floor Corridor...then we ran into Peeves.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes, and Ron had the bright idea to tell him not to yell that we were there and then he tried to punch him. Stupid for two reasons, really. First, poltergeists are incorporeal, and can’t be affected physically. Two, Peeves is a poltergeist, and will do the exact opposite of what you want. So, naturally, he screamed that there were students out of bed in the Charms corridor.”

“Double ouch.”

“Well, you know that the Charms corridor is on the third floor, right? Well, do you remember what else is on the third floor?”

“Don’t tell me you...”

“We did. Without thinking, I unlocked the door with a Charm and we ran inside. And guess what we saw?”

“What?”

“A dog, with three heads. And it was standing on a trapdoor,” Hermione said, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

Harry whistled. “You got back okay?”

“Yeah, and I gave Ron and Neville a good chewing out before I went to bed. I was lucky I didn’t wake up McGonagall.”

“Well, you shouldn’t open doors they bother to lock magically. *Trust* me, what’s in them isn’t supposed to be accessible to students.”

“What would you know about that, Harry?” Hermione asked, her eyes boring into him.

Harry blushed, “I...um...It’s not important.”

“Isn’t it?” she asked. Harry suddenly felt like he had literally been backed into a corner. “*You* shouldn’t be opening doors that were locked, Harry. We did so because it was an emergency. What was in there?”

Harry stared at the floor. “Something.”

“Obviously.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, alright. Suffice to say two Professors caught me and told me to leave and I didn’t listen to the first one.”

Hermione looked scandalized. “And you weren’t punished?”

"Due to *special* circumstances, no."

"Oh, I understand. That's alright, I guess. Just don't do it again. We should get to Breakfast." Harry got up first and extended his hand to pull her up. The two were walking out the door together when they heard an all-too-familiar voice from behind them.

"Oi, what's going on here? What were you doing in there?"

Harry smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know, Weasley," he said. "Congratulations on your 'duel,' by the way."

Ron's ears turned red, and Hermione saw that Harry was really enjoying this. *This isn't right*, she thought. Then again, Ron was really just getting what had been coming to him. The things he'd said, ranging from Harry knowing all of the Unforgivables and using them on animals, to Harry's fondest dream being to kneel at the feet of the man who had killed his parents...They were so blatantly false. *Why did I believe the stupid git?*

"Stop it, Harry. Please. Let's just go and get food, you're starving, aren't you?" Harry nodded stiffly, his gaze never leaving Ron.

"On a first name basis now, are you?" Ron asked with an accusatory glare.

"C'mon Hermione," Harry said, visibly struggling to control his temper. Hermione followed. As they passed Ron, he whispered, "*Traitor...*"

Unfortunately for him, Harry heard it too. And Hermione barely had time to blink before Harry had his wand in the hollow of Ron's neck.

"Little trick I picked up from Daphne. Anything else to say, Weasley?" he hissed, fixing the redhead with a withering glare. Ron swallowed.

"Fine," Harry snapped. "I don't have time to waste on you." He stomped into the Hall, Hermione following him. He turned towards the Slytherin table, but Hermione put a hand on his arm.

"Harry, why don't you sit with me...on the end of the Gryffindor table?"

"Sure that's a good idea?" Harry asked, glancing at the Gryffindors. Ron had just sat down and was whispering excitedly, and the Gryffindors were now looking at him with hatred and Hermione with disdain.

"On second thought," Hermione said. "How about we sit with the Ravenclaws, I know Mandy Brocklehurst...a bit." Harry frowned. "I'll just sit with the Slytherins, Hermione. I'll see you later." It was Hermione's turn to frown.

"Why don't I sit with you?" she asked.

Harry looked at her as if she'd grown an extra head. "Because...I don't know, trust me, it's a bad idea. They don't like Muggleborns."

"I don't care, Harry," she said defiantly.

Harry shrugged, "Your funeral; they can't hate me anymore than they already do."

The reaction when Hermione took a seat next to him at the Slytherin table was predictable. Daphne Greengrass looked at Hermione as if she was something on the bottom of her shoe, and Nott raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. Zabini looked at both of them with disdain, and Pansy and Millicent began whispering excitedly, probably making up more rumors. Malfoy, however, wasn't going to stay quiet.

"What the bloody hell do you think you are doing, Potter? Bringing a mudblood to the Slytherin table! A Gryffindor no less."

Harry's eyes narrowed at the word, 'mudblood.' "I'm eating with a friend, or at least trying to. You know what a friend is, Draco? Or have you never spoken nicely to anyone who wasn't bought by your Death Eater of a father?"

Hermione was shocked by Harry's daring. As, apparently, was Malfoy. "I ought to challenge you to a duel, Potter," he hissed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "And you haven't because..? This isn't the first time I've announced that your father was a Death Eater."

"Because you aren't worth my time. Anyone who associates with such...*filth* is hardly worth my precious time," Malfoy said scathingly.

"It's because I'd win easily and break some of your perfectly manicured fingernails you stupid pureblooded arse," Harry replied. Hermione was starting to wonder if every conversation Harry had with a Slytherin was this intense. Harry certainly seemed to be an expert at this.

"'Pureblooded'? Is that supposed to be an insult?"

"Yes, I consider being an inbred, stuck-up, arrogant prat to be quite an insult, Heir Draco of the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy." Harry managed to make the grandiose title into a scathing retort. Malfoy was fuming.

"Maybe I'll take out my anger on your little mudblood," he hissed maliciously, as if Hermione wasn't there. Hermione was about to speak up when Malfoy suddenly found himself in the same situation Ron had been in moments earlier. And it looked like he'd been in this situation before. He swallowed as he looked down at Harry's wand. "You don't have the guts, Potter."

"Try me," Harry hissed softly. He looked downright frightening. *All of this over me?* He suddenly started gathering food into his napkin, shrinking it as he did. *Where did he learn Shrinking Spells?* "C'mon Hermione." Harry got up, and she followed, grabbing a bread roll. They walked out of the Great Hall, and onto the grounds. Harry sat down on the stairs, unshrunk his food, and began eating like a starving man. *Which was what he was?*

"Harry," Hermione said, taking a seat near him, "why did you do that?"

"Because Malfoy's a slimy, arrogant, stuck-up, inbred prat who can't keep his fat mouth shut. He'd make a horrid Death Eater."

Hermione's mouth dropped open at the insinuation. "Aren't you treating him a little harshly?" Harry laughed out loud, then flipped up his robe sleeve. A series of bruises covered his right arm.

"What's that?" she asked stupidly, having a feeling where this was going.

"Present from Crabbe and Goyle for waking up Draco by screaming."

"Why were you screaming?" Hermione asked.

"Nightmares," Harry replied simply, then took another bit of his bread roll. "My parents."

Hermione's eyes widened in realization. "You have dreams about..."

"Yeah," he said, taking a sip of pumpkin juice from the goblet he'd brought with him. "They are especially bad around Halloween. Notice how I've been looking like the walking dead?" Hermione nodded. "There you go. They only went away when..." he stopped, eyes staring into the distance. Then he shook his head, as if to clear it. "...can't think about that..." he mumbled to himself.

"Think about what?" Hermione asked. He was keeping something important from her. Truth be told, they'd only just started being friends, but based on how freely he shared everything else. But he got nothing new out of him.

The two new friends spent most of the next week in each other's company, on the grounds, in the library, even in the Great Hall. A Ravenclaw in their year, Lisa Turpin, had heard of their predicament and now Harry and Hermione sat with her and Terry Boot. The Ravenclaws didn't seem to mind, thinking that if Hermione was friends with him and Lisa and Terry didn't mind him, he couldn't be that bad. The Gryffindors still loathed him, in part for taking away their resident brain. She spent very little time in the Common Room, where most of the Gryffindors ignored her.

Not that she cared. Harry was more of a friend than she could have ever imagined. The boy was very intelligent, and extremely insightful. He also seemed extremely observant, and she cracked up the first time she witnessed an 'observation duel' between Harry and Theodore Nott. He was kind and understanding as well, and Hermione felt free to discuss her problems with him. He returned the

favor, but she found she didn't mind. She hadn't figured out what it was that he was blatantly hiding from her, and figured it must be something very private.

She was, to put it bluntly, fascinated with Harry's guardian, the legendary Auror Daphne Dressler. Daphne had been the youngest ever to become a full Auror, requiring only a few months of schooling before she was thrown out onto the front lines. And she more than held her own, capturing a half dozen Death Eaters and becoming one of the most feared duelists in Britain. The story of how she lost her husband was tragic and nearly drove Hermione to tears. She'd been morbidly curious when Harry said Daphne had never told him exactly what had happened that night, though that was where Daphne had gotten her scars.

She'd apparently taught a few tricks to her surrogate son, but Hermione learned that most of the advanced magic that Harry knew he'd taught himself. Like both spells he'd tried to use on the troll. Hermione had tried to learn some of the combat spells, and had the Disarming Spell down, though the Stunning Spell was eluding her. It all seemed to come naturally to Harry.

It was late one Sunday afternoon when Harry suggested they go and see their mutual friend, Hagrid. The two crossed the bridge and walked down to Hagrid's hut at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. The door and windows were shut. Odd.

Harry knocked on the door, and there was a sudden series of loud movements. Harry knocked again. "Hagrid? It's just me and Hermione." The movement stopped. "Alright, 'Arry, come in."

Hermione swore she heard a muffled, "What are you doing!" before Hagrid pulled the door open. Inside, much to her dismay, was Ron and Neville. Ron opened his mouth to say something when Harry's eyes locked onto the fireplace. "Hagrid, are you *mad*? A dragon in a wooden house?"

Hermione had no idea what Harry was talking about, but then she saw the egg in the fireplace. It was, indeed, a dragon egg, there was nothing else that size and color. *What exactly are you doing, Hagrid?*

"Oh, great, now the *Slytherin* knows. *Happy* now, Hermione? Happy that Hagrid's going to get *arrested?*" Hagrid paled. Harry's eyes flashed. "Of course she *isn't*, you stupid git, because I have no intention to tell on him. Why don't you shut it, Weasley?"

"How can you stand him, Hermione?" Ron asked, exasperatedly. "He's just a grouchy, slimy, Slytherin *git*."

Hagrid shifted nervously, trying to cover up the egg. "Uh, maybe 'e's right, 'Arry. Maybe yeh should go..."

Harry glared at him, betrayal in his eyes. "Fine," he ground out, then spun on his heel and ran out of the cabin Hermione stood there, glaring at them in turn. "I hope you're happy," she said, before running after her friend.

Hermione found Harry at the water's edge, leaning against a tree. She saw silent tears streaming down his face. He had his Slytherin House Badge in his left hand, his tie in his right. He suddenly rolled the badge in the tie, and with a mighty heavy, hurled both far into the lake.

"Harry?" Hermione asked. Harry spun around with the same eerie military-precision she supposed must have come from watching his guardian. It only seemed to happen when he was upset. She walked forward and put a hand on his shoulder, but he didn't seem to notice. So she pulled him into a tentative embrace, and was surprised to see that he returned it enthusiastically.

They broke apart, and Hermione beamed at him. Harry gave a weak smile back. She pulled him to his feet. "C'mon, we're going to see a man about a dragon." Harry laughed.

They ran back to the house, and Harry pushed open the door, his cheerful expression vanishing, replaced by an emotional mask.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" Ron demanded.

"I've gotten rid of my badge and my tie. I've got nothing else indicating that I'm Slytherin. So, you gonna let me in now?"

Hagrid at least had the grace to look ashamed. “Sorry ‘Arry. Had some bad experiences ‘cause of Slytherins. One got me expelled.” Hermione looked at him in question, but she was polite enough not to ask.

“Well, Ron?” Hermione asked. Ron looked disgusted. “I’d prefer the company of that bloody three headed dog over his!”

“How do you know about Fluffy?”

Four sets of eyes turned to stare at him. Harry said, quietly, “*Fluffy?*” while Hermione preferred “that thing has a *name!*” Ron and Neville just stared, openmouthed.

Hagrid shifted nervously. “Yeah, ‘e’s mine. Bought ‘im off a Greek Chappie down in the Hog’s Head when he was just a little baby.” Hermione stared at Harry in disbelief.

“What’s it guarding?” Harry asked, hoping to catch Hagrid off guard.

“Oh, it’s guarding the S-...Hey! Can’t tell yeh that. That’s between Dumbledore an’ Nicholas Flamel,” Hagrid said angrily.

“Flamel?” Harry repeated. “Does that have anything to do with that little red thing you got in Gringotts?” Hagrid looked alarmed that Harry had seen that.

“Shouldn’ta told yeh that,” Hagrid muttered under his breath. “All right, clear out, all of yeh.” As if grateful for an excuse to leave the company of the Slytherin and the Gryffindor traitor, as Hermione had been dubbed, Ron and Neville ran out, though Neville was much more tentative. Hermione sighed, she believed Neville was better than that.

As they walked up the path back to the bridge, Harry and Hermione turned to each other. “Library,” they said simultaneously, prompting both to go into a fit of laughter. The two friends raced up the path and headed for their favorite part of the school.

Harry and Hermione, as usual, threw themselves headfirst into this latest research project. Unfortunately, despite reading and re-reading as many books on famous witches or wizards in recent times, they found no mention of the mysterious Flamel. Hermione swore she had read the name before, but couldn't figure out where without proper context.

Their research was often cut short by an increasing academic load, as well as Quidditch practice. Harry and Hermione budgeted their time well, and managed to get all of their work done, as well as compete with each other for the best marks in all of their classes. Both were constantly trying to outdo each other with extra credit or including information not found in the textbooks. They paired up most of the time, much to the chagrin of the rest of the classes, who could use a bright partner.

They were the only ones now who could stay awake during History of Magic, and while Hermione wasn't quite as interested in the subject as Harry, the two often held long discussions on the reasons behind certain goblin rebellions or giant wars. They sat with Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot at meals, neither of whom they were really friends with, but the two were friendly enough to give them a place to sit together. Malfoy seemed to be ignoring Harry's existence, something that Harry didn't mind at all. Aside from the occasional conversation with Nott or Greengrass, Harry rarely spoke to his Slytherin classmates.

Except during Quidditch, of course. Flint's motto was 'win the cup or die trying.' And indeed, it seemed as if he was trying to kill them. Harry loved to fly, but flying in freezing cold rain and wind wasn't his idea of a walk in the park. Strangely enough, his teammates didn't seem to care that he always brought Hermione along, who would sit in the otherwise empty stands, reading. Harry supposed they thought that the rest of Gryffindor hated Granger, so she probably wouldn't be spying on their practice. Not that Hermione would understand the complicated aerial maneuvers anyway. Quidditch, like flying, was not her forte. Still, Harry would push his best friend onto a broom once in a while, trying to at least get her proficient. It was slow going.

The actual game was played at the end of November, Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw. Ravenclaw had a team almost entirely composed of

second and third years, none of whom had been together very long. Roger Davies, a third year and one of the Chasers, was the only player who had been on last year's team, mostly comprised of 7th years. Harry's opposite number was a pretty second year girl named Cho Chang who seemed to be practiced on a broom, but wasn't nearly as good as Harry. The team as a whole was inexperienced and hadn't practiced nearly enough, and the Slytherins took full advantage.

It was a rout from the time that Madam Hooch blew her whistle. The Slytherin chasers, Flint, Montague, and Pucey, scored with reckless abandon, reducing the young Keeper to tears. The Ravenclaw Beaters could hardly get their hands on a Bludger to hit, because Bole and Derrick were playing the best they ever had, harassing the Ravenclaw Chasers and even causing Chang to crash. The game was played in the middle of a rainstorm, and the frigid air finally justified all of those hellish practices.

Hermione was sitting in the Slytherin section for fear of her own safety. Harry had begged Nott and Greengrass to let her sit there, just so that she could support him, and they had reluctantly agreed, though Daphne had added, "don't expect me to talk to her." Nott had just nodded, a sign that Harry took as meaning, "don't worry about her." Harry really wasn't sure what to think of the enigmatic Slytherin boy at times.

With Hermione cheering him on, wearing a borrowed green scarf to placate the Slytherins, Harry prowled around in pursuit of the Snitch. The score was 210-20 Slytherin, and Maggie Bletchley was making a show of lounging on her broom, yawning occasionally to mock the ineptitude of the Ravenclaw Chasers. Harry spotted the Snitch near her and took off, making a fist to indicate the Snitch was near her. She got out of the way, and Harry quickly was in pursuit. Chang reacted slowly, being on the other side of the field, and Harry had the golden ball struggling to escape his grip by the time she reached him. The final score was staggering, 360-20 Slytherin. Harry flew down and received a hug from Hermione and a pat on the back in congratulations. Nott just smiled mysteriously at Harry.

Unfortunately for Hermione, the response of the Gryffindors to her sitting, ‘behind enemy lines’ was not a positive one. Nor was it very intelligent off her to admit she’d attended every Slytherin practice. Ron Weasley started ranting about “House Loyalty,” something that made Harry snort into his eggs when he heard about it.

He was of the opinion that it was Hermione’s duty to report back on the Slytherins. When she point-blank refused, stating that the only reason Flint tolerated her presence was because she *wasn’t* a spy, Ron drew back his fist to hit her, but was stopped by Neville. Harry told Ron that he was damned lucky for that; if he had struck his friend, Harry would have hexed him into the next millennium.

Chapter 9: Home for the Holidays

As terrible as things had been around Halloween, they were now as good as Harry could imagine as the Christmas Holidays approached. Amazing what having an intelligent and engaging best friend could do to a person. Harry and Hermione had gotten to know each other quite well, indeed, they rarely spent time out of classes by themselves. The research for Flamel continued, but both were starting to lose the fervor they had started with. Hermione was certain that Dumbledore would find a way to protect whatever it was, and while Harry didn't share his best friend's view of Dumbledore's omniscience, he trusted that the man would do what he had to do. It really wasn't his problem, was it?

The newest problem the two were facing was how to deal with the upcoming holidays. Hermione's parents insisted she come home with them and go on a skiing trip, though seeing their daughter didn't seem to be their only motive. Hermione had confided to Harry that she wasn't certain that her parents saw the worth in a magical education, and that they weren't happy that she could prove she was working hard and learning things until exams. And no matter how many times she insisted that Harry was now her best friend, and that she wanted to stay with him, they seemed skeptical of the sudden about-face (mostly because Hermione neglected to mention the part about Harry saving Hermione's life and nearly dying in the process).

As for Harry, as far as he knew, he would be staying at Hogwarts. Daphne hadn't sent an owl in a while, and her last one had indicated she was heavily involved in a number of research projects at the Magical Institute of Claw's Clan. She had also promised Edmond's only remaining family that she would visit them in Australia for the holidays, and she didn't really think Harry would enjoy himself there. Harry didn't mind, he wasn't nearly as lonely as he had been, and his entire dorm was going home to their families, so that wasn't a problem either. No, the problem was that the vast majority of the students staying were Gryffindors, more specifically, Weasleys. Apparently Ron's parents and little sister were going to a dragon preserve in Romania to visit his older brother, Charlie.

And while Fred and George didn't seem to hate him nearly as much as their younger brother did, Harry was the most obvious target for pranks. And while he was observant, the twins were experts at their craft. And it wasn't like he could go to Snape for help.

Fortunately, the answer to his prayers arrived via Hedwig two days after he sent a letter to Daphne, the ninth of December. Harry went downstairs and found Hermione waiting for him patiently. Besides a glare from Ron Weasley and the Gryffindors, though it seemed rather half-hearted, Harry and Hermione joined Mandy, Terry, and Lisa at the Ravenclaw table, where the students had gotten used to the presence of the Slytherin and the Gryffindor. While Hermione, Terry, and Mandy launched into a continuation of their discussion on Transfiguration from the previous night, where each student added things they had read about after dinner, Harry exchanged greetings with Lisa, who returned them politely, and began eating. He was pleasantly surprised when a letter from Hedwig landed on his bacon.

Harry saw it was from Daphne and ripped open the envelope.

Dear Harry,

I've got good news for you. Edmond's brother has unfortunately contracted a bad case of Dragon Pox (not good for anyone his age), and so my trip to Australia has been canceled, allowing you to spend the holidays with me. Rather than returning to Newfoundland, I've invited an old friend of mine, Andromeda Tonks, to come stay with us at Dressler Manor. I believe her daughter, who is attending Auror school, will be able to come as well. You'll like her.

I hope things are better at school, it at least sound like you and Hermione are friends now. To be perfectly honest, I'm rather shocked by the immaturity of your class, which reflects heavily on the parents. I suppose that many of them were heavily involved in the First War on both sides, and that has colored their world view a fair bit.

Please send a response back with Hedwig. I'll understand if you choose to stay at Hogwarts for the holidays. If not, I'll pick you up at Platform 9 ¾ on December 18th.

Love,

Daphne

Harry grinned broadly. "Problem solved, Hermione," he said, passing the letter to it. She let out a sigh. "That's a relief. Oooh, I'd love to meet Andromeda's daughter. The Aurors only accept the best."

Terry Boot spoke up. "Who is it, again?"

"Well, her mum is Andromeda Tonks. Know who her daughter is?" Harry asked. Terry shook his head, but a girl named Marietta, a second year, answered instead.

"Her name's Nymphadora, though she hates her name. She's quite...interesting. I didn't know her well, though the whole school knows who she was." Harry nodded his appreciation.

"That's great, Harry," Hermione said happily. "I can tell my parents that I won't have a problem coming home, since we'll both be with family."

Harry pulled out a small roll of parchment and wrote.

Aunt Daph,

I'd love to stay with you at Dressler Manor. Things are a lot better here, and Hermione and I have become best friends. It may have taken a troll club to the ribs, but at least it happened.

I'll see you at Platform 9 ¾ on the 18th.

Love,

Harry

"Here girl," Harry said, handing the response to Hedwig, who had been helping herself to Harry's bacon. She hooted in appreciation and took off.

December 17th came up faster than Harry could believe. In honor of the holiday season, most of the Professors (save Snape of course, no

one could fill him with Christmas cheer) suspended their usual lessons in favor of learning things that were in the spirit of the holidays. In double Herbology, they trimmed mistletoes, and planted small fir trees, in addition to learning how to keep certain sensitive magical plants warm. In Transfiguration, they had possibly their most enjoyable lesson. Since befriending Hermione, who was obviously McGonagall's favorite student, the Gryffindor Head of House had been quite cordial to him, though it still took a visible effort for her to award points to Slytherin.

Unfortunately, that didn't seem to convince the Gryffindors that Harry was really alright. Actually, his occasional habit of coldly threatening people that annoyed him had further vilified him. The stories that Ron made up about being under Harry's wand would have been humorous if everyone hadn't believed them.

As for Transfiguration, they were trying to transfigure small cubes of thin metal into Christmas ornaments. Harry was undecided for a while. His first thought was a Snitch, but that was far too complex to do correctly. Hermione had, after several tries, created a book-shaped ornament that she could paste a picture on. She had used one she had in her bag, the one that featured Harry and Hermione, covered from head to foot in snow, playfully hurling snowballs at each other. Somehow, the gesture made Harry feel quite warm inside. Harry had eventually tried to create something that vaguely resembled a mirror, in which he superimposed an image of him and Hermione, taken by a helpful Hufflepuff named Justin Finch-Fletchley, over one of the few he had of his parents, Daphne, and Edmond. Hermione had been curious as to his choice, though McGonagall had given him a small smile, one that prompted more furious questions from his best friend.

Questions that Harry had refused to answer. For some reason, Harry found himself unwilling to share what he'd seen in the Mirror of Erised.

The last class of the day was an interesting one. In Charms, Flitwick taught them a few spells to animate holiday cards and letters. While complicated, it was interesting to learn how to make holiday cards sing carols or repeat holiday greetings. Harry didn't have much luck with the charm, and seeing the overall lack of success, Professor

Flitwick admitted that he might have chosen something a bit too difficult.

After dinner, Harry spent a few minutes packing what he need to bring home with him into his trunk, while he planned to lock the rest inside his four-poster bed with the security wards. He was eternally grateful to his aunt for teaching him those, as despite the hatred between he and his roommates, none of his personal belongings had been damaged.

Harry read quite a bit that night, because for some reason he couldn't get his mind off Hermione. He wasn't sure why, but he knew she meant everything to him, at least when Daphne wasn't around.

He honestly couldn't explain it. Despite being an eleven-year old, Harry somehow knew that this wasn't a crush or anything like that. He didn't have any feelings of the sort for Hermione. She was his best friend, and he loved her in that sense, not a romantic sense. So why was he so worried about leaving her?

Harry shook his head, trying to clear it. He was tired, and thinking about things like this wasn't going to help. What would come would come.

Harry awoke, as usual, before his roommates. He often found it quite odd that he was a heavy sleeper everywhere but in the dungeons. Something unnerved him here. After a quick shower, he made his bed the best he could, then began unpacking the things from his trunk that he planned to leave. Once they were neatly arranged on his bed, he shut the curtains and locked them, setting a new password, 'Nymphadora.' He wasn't quite sure why he had chosen the name of a person he didn't actually know, but he had to admit the name was both memorable and random. In other words, he'd remember it, and no one else would guess it.

As his roommates finally began to rise out of the abyss, Harry left the common room, dressed in his school robes. He exited the common room and headed up to the Great Hall. Predictably, Hermione was waiting for him in the corridor. He walked over to her. "You know, you don't have to wait for me every time."

"I know," she said, "but I don't mind. By the way, we leave at 9:30 for the ten o'clock train.

"I know that," Harry said, as they sat down. "We've got plenty of time." Hermione looked flabbergasted.

"You actually packed? I've never met a boy who actually packed before they had to."

Harry looked at her strangely. "Okay."

After that rather awkward conversation, they talked about more intriguing things, such as how pathetic their DADA lessons had been this year. "Have you actually learned anything from Quirrell, Hermione?" Harry asked, taking a bite of bacon.

Hermione looked nervous, as she was obviously about to badmouth a teacher. "Well, we learned a bit about Defense, but..."

"...But, we've learned far more studying outside of class, and the man is terrified of his own subject? Though..." Harry broke off, wondering how he would phrase this.

"What Harry?" Hermione asked, taking a sip of pumpkin juice. "What about Quirrell?"

"Well...I dunno, it just seems like he's putting on an act. His stuttering and all. Somehow, I don't think it's genuine. There isn't any fear behind it, its almost forced," Harry said, glancing up at the Professor in question, who was eating quietly, jumping at small noises.

"Well," Hermione began in her 'know-it-all' voice, "I have noticed some of what you are talking about. But I think he's just incompetent."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "You just admitted a Professor didn't know what he was talking about. Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Jane Granger?" Hermione swatted his arm.

"Stop it, Harry!" she snapped. Then she sighed, before glancing up and down the table to make sure no one was listening. Lisa, Mandy, and Terry were all sleeping late. "Harry, do you...do you feel this

uneasiness about us not being together...not in *that* was, obviously, but...well do you have any idea what I'm talking about?" she finished very quickly.

"I know exactly what you're talking about. I dunno Hermione, what do you suppose is causing it?" Harry asked, looking into her eyes.

"I think...well, we've just been depending on each other so much that it's almost scary that we're going to be apart. I mean, both of our Houses hate us. Don't blame yourself for that, Harry. I chose to be your friend, knowing the consequences."

Harry nodded. "I don't. It's my fault, in a way, but we'd both be miserable if we hadn't become friends."

They continued to talk about their friendship, among other things, until Terry and Mandy wandered down, looking exhausted. They explained that a bunch of older students had been partying the previous night, and keeping everyone up. Flitwick had found them at about three in the morning and threatened to suspend them. They were all to be given a month's detention. Lisa had left the previous night, as she was going away to America to visit family, and they had to take a Muggle airplane. Harry had forgotten that Lisa was muggleborn.

Harry and Hermione walked side by side down to the horseless carriages, chatting amiably. They saw Hagrid, who appeared to be doing something with the air. He suddenly jerked back, as though struck. "Stop that, Hort. Yeh gonna hurt me one o' these days," he said to the air.

Harry walked up to him. "Hagrid? Are you alright?" he asked, unsure of what exactly the big man was doing.

"Fine, 'Arry. Just having some trouble with the threstrels."

"Pardon?" Hermione asked. "What exactly are you doing?"

"Well I'm...oh," he said, smacking his forehead. "Forgot yeh couldn't see 'em, 'ermione. Yeh see, Hermione, the carriages are pulled by these big creatures called threstrels. They uh, resemble a black horse,

and they have wings. What's so special 'bout them is that only those who have seen death can see them. Wonderful creatures, threstrals," he said, ignoring the flabbergasted look Hermione was giving him.

"Threstrals? Aren't they *dark* creatures? And they pull the carriages?" Hermione asked, her voice growing higher with each question.

"Well, yeah. They aren't dark, they're just considered really unlucky. Codswallop. Yeh can't see them 'til *after* yeh see someone die." Harry was confused.

"Hagrid, why can't *I* see them?"

Hagrid looked confused. "Yeh *can't*? But yer mum...maybe yeh had yer eyes closed, or sommat. I dunno, be grateful, I suppose. I saw me dad die when I was in second year. Died of some kinda disease, or sommat like that. Real sad I was."

"Sorry for reminding you, Hagrid," Harry said, staring into the air that Hagrid was now petting. Suddenly, there was a flash of something, and a faint outline appeared, before Harry saw the threstral itself. But it was gone soon after. Harry jerked back in surprise, and Hermione caught him.

"What was *that*? I think...I think I saw the threstral..." Harry said in confusion.

Hagrid frowned. "How? Yeh said yeh can't see 'em!"

"It was like...an outline, then I saw the whole thing...then it was gone." Hagrid scratched his massive beard.

"Meybe since yer mum died in front of yeh, yeh can see 'em, but yer eyes were closed. I dunno, Harry. Meybe yeh ought ter look in a book or sommat. Whoa, what's going on here?" Hagrid hurried over to him. "Back off, yeh crazy creature. Stay still, 'Arry, this one seems to have taken a liking to yeh. Careful, now, just walk slowly away." Harry complied nervously, scared at the idea of a massive creature that he could see taking 'a liking to him.'

"All right now, yeh can go, 'Arry. Best yeh do. Pick another carriage for yeh and Hermione. Don't know what got into this one," Hagrid said. "See yeh later."

Harry and Hermione bid Hagrid goodbye and found another carriage. The rest of the school began arriving several minutes later. Most annoying was that twice, older students looking for an empty carriage to snog each other's brains out poked their heads in, before leaving after they saw the two first years. Harry and Hermione were both reading when someone came into the carriage. It was Neville.

"Hullo Neville," Harry said cordially. "Would you like to ride with us?" The boy looked startled, but nodded. "Budge over, would you Hermione?" Harry asked her, and she complied. Neville sat down.

"Thanks. I've been being harassed by Malfoy all day. It's uh, about my parents, they're...not well," Neville said quietly. Hermione looked confused, but Harry was livid. "I suppose knocking the arrogant inbred prat off his broom didn't work well enough then," Harry sighed. Neville looked stunned.

"So you do know! And you went after him because...because he insulted my parents?" Neville asked in amazement. Hermione looked very frustrated that she didn't know what was going on.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked impatiently. "What's wrong with your parents, and why is it so awful to talk about them? Well, I mean, it's not nice to talk badly of other people's parents, but..." Hermione was ranting, and Harry interrupted her.

"Do you want me to tell her or you?" he asked Neville.

"Uh, I dunno, I don't like to talk about it..." he said quietly. "How do you know, anyway?"

"Alice and Daphne were good friends. They knew each other from the Aurors."

Neville nodded. "Oh...um, you can tell her..."

Harry nodded. "Alright. Hermione, Neville's parents were both Aurors during the first war. After Voldemort attack me and killed my parents, some of Voldemort's nastiest Death Eaters went after Neville's parents, hoping for information about their master...and Neville's parents would give it to them." Harry said, glancing over at the pudgy Gryffindor, who appeared be on the verge of tears. He patted him on the shoulder, then continued. "Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Rabastan Lestrange, along with Barty Crouch's son, tortured them...tortured them until they lost their minds." Hermione gasped, turning white.

"Oh my god...I'm so sorry Neville," she said, wrapping her arms around the boy sitting next to her. The carriage began to move.

Neville looked shocked at her show of affection, but said quietly. "It's okay. I live with my gran, and it isn't that awful..."

"Still, it's not the same," Harry said quietly, staring into the Gryffindor's eyes. Neville nodded. "No, you know as well as I. Mrs. Dressler seems like a nice woman, but she isn't your real mum..." Harry nodded sadly, closing his eyes for a moment, picturing the Mirror of Erised.

Hermione suddenly felt like she was an outsider who didn't belong in this conversation. The two boys in the carriage had a connection she wanted no part of. Though it seemed like Neville's parents were still alive, it also seemed like that was just a fact. If they were entirely insane, it was little comfort. They probably didn't even recognize their son.

"Sorry Hermione, didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable," Neville said. "But somehow...that kind of helped..."

"It's alright Neville. I'm guessing you've never told anyone before," Harry said.

"No...no I haven't. Gran wouldn't be pleased with me, she reckons I should be proud of them. But some people might make fun of them if they knew..."

"Then don't tell anyone if you don't want. It's up to you, Neville, they are your parents."

Neville had wanted to sit with Hermione and Harry on the express, but he decided against angering his fellow Gryffindors. He apologized and then went to join Seamus and Dean. Harry and Hermione found an empty compartment. They sat down and began to read, occasionally stopping to hold a conversation. They were visited twice during the journey, once by Dean and Seamus, who actually seemed rather civil to them, and once by Malfoy, in which both Harry and Draco drew wands. They ended up leaving when a prefect came up behind them, and no hexes were exchanged. Soon after that, Harry fell asleep, much to Hermione's amusement. As he slept, a book lying open on his lap, she wondered again where she would be if she'd never met him. She didn't even want to think about the possibility, and went back to her Transfiguration textbook.

They arrived at Platform 9 ¾ at noon. Hermione shook her compartment mate awake and they got their things together before exiting the train. Hermione felt a strange warmth when she saw her best friend's face light up with unadulterated joy, and run toward a blond-haired woman standing in the crowd, her eyes shining with some powerful emotion that Hermione couldn't fully identify. Harry pulled the woman into an embrace, and she returned it warmly.

This must be Daphne.

In some ways, she looked exactly as she had expected the legendary ex-Auror to look. Her slender build and definite grace meant she was probably very nimble and quick while dueling. She carried herself with a self-confidence that she'd rarely seen before. But the blond-haired woman with the sparkling grey-green eyes looked as if she was in heaven as she embraced her charge. Hermione felt her eyes start to tear up, and she noticed a black-haired woman with pale blue eyes standing silently near the two, looking on with amusement and awe at the same time. Hermione nervously made her way over to Daphne Dressler and her friend. Not surprisingly, Daphne noticed her before she could introduce herself.

"You must be Hermione," Daphne said in a melodious voice full of love and caring. "Harry, why don't you introduce your friend?"

"That's not necessary, Mrs. Dressler," Hermione said. She didn't like to be 'formally' introduced, she found it rather uncomfortable. "I'm Hermione Granger, and Harry is my best friend," she said confidently.

"Please Hermione, just Daphne. I don't really like to be called by my late husband's name." She said this with a friendly face and in a pleasant tone, but Hermione could sense the despair in her words. She nodded quickly.

"So, it may have taken my son...or nephew...or whatever affectionate name I choose to call Harry getting clubbed by a troll to get you two to speak with one another, but you are friends now?" Daphne asked. Her tone of voice betrayed no anger or bitterness, just curiosity. Hermione wasn't sure why, but she felt comfortable talking with this woman she barely knew. She could see why Harry adored her.

"Yes...uh, that's what happened. It's really my fault," she blurted. Daphne smiled.

"Don't worry, Hermione, the House biases and prejudices have existed for centuries. Harry's fame only exacerbated the problem. Think of it this way: you have been the fastest to overcome them. I expect things to improve eventually, I'm just glad that Harry finally has a real friend. I was starting to worry."

"*Aunt Daph...*" Harry whined, turning slightly pink in embarrassment. "I'm fine. I'm doing well in school, and since I met Hermione, I'm not lonely anymore. When are you going to introduce me to *your* friend, anyway?" Harry asked, eyeing the woman standing aside Harry, watching the whole exchange with interest.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "This is Andromeda Tonks," she said, indicating the black-haired witch standing beside her. She carried a noble air about her, though not the arrogance one would expect from a pureblooded witch. Hermione guessed she at least came from a great pureblooded family. Truth be told, she didn't understand the fascination with blood in the wizarding world, though she could at least comprehend the importance people placed upon family name, though she didn't agree with it.

Andromeda, her pale blue eyes twinkling with amusement, extended a hand to Harry and Hermione, who both shook it. "Where are your parents, Hermione?" Daphne asked. Hermione started.

"Oh Merlin! They must be looking for me. I've got to go, Harry," she said.

"Why don't I meet them, Hermione?" Harry said. He turned to Daphne and Andromeda. "Would you mind?" They both shook their heads, and Hermione grabbed Harry by the hand and hauled him towards a couple who looked to be in their thirties, and stood out quite a bit, as they were dressed in Muggle clothing. She smiled when they saw Hermione, and her mother, a woman of average height with Hermione's brown eyes and wavy, dark brown hair, seemed to relax visibly. Her father, a taller man dressed in a Muggle suit and tie, had Hermione's golden brown hair, which appeared to be rather fluffy. He also stiffened when he saw Harry on Hermione's arm.

"Hi mum! Hi dad!" Hermione said excitedly. Her mother captured her in a hug, leaving Harry standing there, feeling rather awkward. Hermione's father gave his daughter a quick hug as well, then her mother looked at Harry expectantly.

"Who's this, Hermione?" she asked.

"Oh...that's Harry. Harry Potter. We're best friends now," she said, a bit nervously. Harry found out why a few seconds later.

"Oh, so *this* is the Harry we've heard so much about." He fixed the eleven-year old with a stern glare. Hermione turned red.

"Dad!" she scolded. "I told you, we've made up. He...helped me out of a rather tight situation and I got to know him. We've been inseparable since then." Her father nodded, and his expression softened. "Hello Harry." Harry nodded politely in return.

"Anyway, Harry, this is my dad, Gregory Granger, and my mum, Jane Granger." Harry nodded again.

Jane Granger looked around curiously and asked rather bluntly, "Where are your parents, dear?"

Harry looked at the ground, while Hermione gasped. Mrs. Granger looked confused. "They died when I was one," he said quietly, and Mrs. Granger appeared horrified.

"I'm so sorry dear," she said quietly. "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's alright," Harry said, regaining his composure. He was caught off guard by the question. "You didn't know. I live with my mother's best friend."

Mr. Granger appeared to realize the situation was getting awkward. "Why don't you say goodbye, Hermione?" he said, nudging her forward a bit. Hermione bit her lip and then pulled Harry into a tight embrace, which Harry returned warmly.

"I see you when we get back!" she said. "Bye Harry."

"Bye Hermione!" Harry said. The Grangers left, and Harry went in search of Daphne. He found her still talking with Andromeda.

"Well, that seemed a bit awkward," Daphne said lightly. "What was the problem?"

"Well, Hermione seemed to think initially that I only wanted her help with homework, and told her parents that I was harassing her. They don't know about the troll, so they had a hard time accepting the sudden turnaround." Daphne nodded.

"She's worried that if they knew how dangerous the magical world is that they might not let her come back, right?" Harry nodded.

"It's a pity, really," Andromeda said. "The magical world is wonderful, but there is no denying that it's more dangerous. I'm surprised that more Muggleborns don't end up getting a magical education. A lot of their parents don't understand how much more physical punishment that wizards can take. Or more importantly, how extensive and quick magical healing is."

"I suppose that the whole idea is strange enough. The thing that would stand out to the Grangers would be that Hermione's life was in

jeopardy, not the better opportunities and also the small likelihood of them losing their daughter," Harry said. Andromeda looked impressed.

"Alright, Harry, let's get to the car," said Daphne.

"Car? We're not taking a portkey or apparating?" Harry asked. He'd been in a Muggle car before, but wasn't fond of them.

"I got in big trouble for making an illegal portkey, had to pay a fine and all. And the anti-apparition wards are up at Dressler Manor. I'm going to address the problem, but for now, either they let everybody in or nobody in." Harry nodded.

They managed to get Harry's trunk out of the train and navigate King's Cross without trouble (though Daphne and Andromeda's robes did get some funny looks from a few Muggles.) They found the car, loaded Harry's trunk into the boot, and set off on the two-hour drive.

"So, Harry. Besides scaring me to death by nearly getting killed twice, how has your school year been?" Daphne asked conversationally.

Harry launched into a fairly long description of the events of his first year at Hogwarts. Daphne, who sat in the back of the car with him while Andromeda drove, listened intently. Her eyes grew sad as Harry summarized the isolation and despair he had felt, and how the entire school seemed to despise or fear him. She comforted him by saying that Edmond had had his own troubles. Most of his classmates had become Death Eaters, including Severus Snape. She assured him that Snape was, in fact, loyal to Dumbledore for reasons she really didn't understand, though she wasn't surprised at his hatred for Harry. She vaguely described the feud between James Potter and Severus Snape, but Harry had a feeling that there was much more than she was saying.

What she was disturbed by, though, was Harry's suspicion that someone had hexed his broom. That meant that it had either been a teacher, or a very powerful seventh year. Both possibilities were disturbing.

Then Harry stopped when he reached the part about the dragon. "Daphne, do you know who Nicholas Flamel is?" he asked innocently.

Daphne stiffened, and her eyes widened. Andromeda nearly skidded off the road. "What was that?" she asked, dodging a bus.

Daphne suddenly seized Harry's shirt and held him stiffly. "*Harry*," she asked, her voice shaking, "*why did you ask that?*"

Harry stared at her in confusion. Obviously, if Andromeda knew who Flamel was, he was important. And his aunt looked scared by the mere mention of him.

Daphne stared in shock and fear at her nephew. *How did he find out about him? Why is he asking? My god, I heard rumors that something important was being hidden at Hogwarts. But the Stone! Is Dumbledore mad!*

"I can't answer that, Harry. *Do not* ask again. Trust me, it's for your own good. I'm sorry, Harry, but at your age, you don't need to know." Harry nodded stiffly.

"Alright," he said, though privately he hadn't been discouraged in the least. "I'll forget about it. Want to hear a bit about Hermione?"

They spent the remainder of the trip talking about Harry's new best friend. Daphne seemed to like the girl quite a bit. They pulled off the highway, and after five minutes of driving, they arrived at the edge of the wards. "We'll get out here, Harry. I'll levitate your trunk."

They walked to the house, and with a whispered password, Daphne opened the doors. Harry pulled his trunk inside, and the two elder house elves took the trunk and vanished. Suddenly, there was a loud crashing sound from one of the rooms, and a string of muttered profanities. Andromeda sighed. "Clumsy Nymmy," she muttered. Harry ran into the room where the sounds had originated from.

Lying sprawled on the floor was one of the strangest looking girls Harry had ever seen. She was definitely older than him, though she still looked like she was a teenager. She had a pale, heart-shaped face that was currently flushed in embarrassment. She had short, spiky pink hair, and bright yellow eyes. She began to pull herself to her feet, and spotted Harry. Suddenly, she closed her eyes, and when she opened them, her eyes matched Harry's emerald green,

and her hair was now shoulder length and jet black. She grinned up at him.

Harry stared, then he figured it out. "Metamorphmagus."

'Nymmy' grinned at stood up. "Harry Potter, nice to meet you. I'm Nymphadora Tonks, but please, just call me Tonks. I can't stand 'Nymphadora,'" she said, making a face.

"And why would you dislike the name that I chose for you, my beautiful Nymphadora," Andromeda said, standing in the doorway.

"I ask again, mother. Were you tipsy when you chose that name?" Tonks asked. Daphne laughed.

"Why don't you and Tonks get to know each other better? Daphne and I have some catching up to do." The two older women left the room.

"Well, you heard mum, let's go upstairs Harry," Tonks said. Harry followed the strange girl into his bedroom, where she plopped down on his bed, crossing her legs. Harry sat in the chair next to the desk and stared at her.

"So, how's your first year of Hogwarts going? I heard from mum that you've been living in Canada for all these years."

"Yeah," Harry said, "Hogwarts had been...a unique experience, and not all good."

Tonks nodded. "Yeah, that can happen. Had some problems myself. Graduated last year. Ravenclaw, like my mum. I'm staying with mum because I don't have that much gold. Hopefully I'll graduate Auror School. The pay is pretty good. So what House are you in? Gryffindor, like your folks?"

Harry shook his head and Tonks frowned. "Slytherin."

Tonks jerked back in surprise. "Slytherin...?"

Harry glared at her. “Do you have *any* idea what it’s like? To be judged solely on a bloody *badge* and uniform? To be hated and despised because of where you were placed by a bloody hat! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THAT’S LIKE!”

Tonks looked horrified. Harry took a deep, heaving breath. He didn’t know why he had screamed at her, but he had felt the overwhelming need. It was strangely satisfying, in a way.

Tonks closed her eyes. “Oh Merlin, I’m sorry, Harry. I actually *do* know exactly how you are feeling. You see, being a Metamorphmagus, *and* a Black, *and* a Half-blood pretty much meant that *everybody* had a reason to dislike me. I was considered a freak, somebody to be used for everyone else’s entertainment. People would bully me into doing certain faces and such, and laugh at me. I really didn’t have any friends. The Slytherins hated me because I was a half-blood, and the daughter of a blood-traitor. My mum’s family, the Blacks, were one of the Darkest families around, so everyone thought I was a Dark Witch. My mum has two sisters. One’s a Death Eater, and in Azkaban, the other is a Malfoy. Oh, and my mum’s cousin, Sir...oh bloody hell!”

“What?” Harry asked. Tonks had turned white. “Nothing...nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, Tonks,” Harry said.

Tonks looked terrified. “He wasn’t a good man, I’m not going to tell you any more.”

“Alright,” Harry said.

“Yeah, my cousin’s name is Draco Malfoy. Arrogant, stupid little git, a miniature of his father.”

“I’m a roommate of the inbred prat,” Harry said.

Tonks giggled. “Inbred prat? That’s a good one!”

“Normally, it’s arrogant, pureblooded, inbred, prat,” Harry admitted.

Tonks beamed. “That’s even better.”

"So what's going on with all those books?"

Tonks winced. "As cool as it may seem to be an Auror, you have to be mad to try to enter the program. Not only do you need top marks, but I suspect they weed out the incompetent candidates by literally burying them under books. I'm going to sound like I swallowed a few encyclopedias by the end of it." She made another face.

"Sounds like it," Harry said, looking at his hands. "So, you didn't have that many friends either?"

Tonks sighed. "Nope. Not until about 6th year, anyway. Part of the advantage of being a Metamorphmagus is that when I want to, I can make myself as irresistible to the opposite sex as humanly possible." She sighed again, and Harry blanched. She laughed at him.

"Merlin, Harry, you aren't *that* far off from being a teenager. Got any girls you fancy?"

Harry spluttered. "No!"

Tonks laughed at him again, tucking her knees up to her chin and rolling backwards. Harry was happy she was wearing jeans. He had a feeling that Tonks wouldn't hesitate to torment him like *that*. Eleven or not.

"Has anyone told you they sometimes *doubt* that you are eighteen?" Harry asked innocently. Tonks scowled at him.

"What? I can't have fun once in a while?" she asked just as innocently.

Harry groaned. "Tonks, can you *please* stop that. I'll *admit* it, at eleven years old, I'm *not* comfortable thinking about that kind of thing. Check back three or four years later."

"Okay, be *that* way, spoilsport," she pouted. Harry rolled his eyes.

Changing the subject, Harry asked, "So have you met Rufus Scrimgeour, the Head of the Auror Office?"

Tonks' mischievous grin vanished. "Why do you want to know?"

"Daphne's mentioned him before. He sounds...interesting."

"Well, he's a real stickler when it comes to the Dark Arts. Hates them and everyone who practices them. He won't hesitate to do something that needs to be done, and he's got a rather forceful personality. He's a good politician, too, runs rings around Fudge at times. He's a legend at the Auror School. Then again, you *live* with a legend, not to mention you *are* one!"

"Is Daphne really that well known?" Harry asked. A lot of people seemed to know who she was, even Ron did.

"Oh yeah. Passing Auror School in months will do that. Helped that she killed Evan Rosier and captured a half-dozen Death Eaters, too. Oh, and my entire class wants a full report on you and her when I get back. They're madly jealous of me getting to spend the holidays with the Grey Maiden and the Boy-Who-Lived."

"Grey Maiden?" Harry asked. He'd never heard Daphne called that before.

"Oh, yeah, that's her nickname," Tonks said, looking thoughtful.

"Why?" Harry asked. He wasn't sure why she'd been called either of those names.

"Well, the grey part...Are you sure you've never heard this before?"

"No. Daphne has said she did some things. But she doesn't regret any of them."

"And that doesn't bother you? That's she killed people?" Tonks asked, her eyes wide.

"No. Daphne loves me and she's a wonderful woman. She was an Auror. It was her duty to stop followers of the Dark Arts. Rosier got what he deserved," Harry said firmly. "Daphne was...emotionally unstable at the time. She might have thought better of it under normal circumstances."

"Alright, Harry. I guess that makes sense," she admitted, then began her explanation of his aunt's moniker.

"Well, she's called Grey because while she was a Light witch, she wasn't opposed to using the Dark Arts. She's rather good with them, actually. It's why she's such a feared duelist. She can perform all of the Unforgivables and a number of other illegal curses. But the Ministry gave her a license, because they trusted her motives.

Maiden is self-explanatory. Actually, it has to do with her awe-inspiring faithfulness to her late husband. She's also best known for her tenacity. Her parents were killed when she was fifteen years old for supporting Dumbledore. She earned her reputation because after she graduated, she actively hunted for the people who had killed her family." Tonks paused.

"She found them, hurt them, and sent them to Azkaban. They both died there. They were brother and sister, Helga and Roland McCourn. Two of You-Know-Who's best, and earliest, Death Eaters. She went in with no backup, killed another Death Eater in a duel, and beat both of them. There wasn't much left of them, and she got out with a moderate-sized gash from a random Slicing Curse. That was her crowning moment. It was also when the Ministry gave her the license to use Unforgivables," Tonks said, her eyes looking up, trying to recall more information.

She looked Harry in the eyes. "This really doesn't bother you?"

"No," Harry said, a bit of a tremor in his voice. "Daphne's told me all of what you just said, albeit in less detail. She told me she didn't want to, but she wasn't going to let me find out from secondary sources." It was true, of course, but hearing it from someone else was somewhat unnerving. He didn't believe Daphne could be a cold-blooded killer.

"You are a strange boy, Harry."

"Some would say the same of you, Tonks." She scowled at him.

"So, what's your family like?" Harry asked, changing the subject. "Is it just you and your mum?"

Tonks made a disgusted face. "Well, I had a dad, obviously, a Muggle. Mum loved him, but he lived a little...too free for her tastes. Blew a whole bunch of gold betting on Quidditch, and got Mum right pissed at him. Haven't seen him since, and I don't think Mum misses him much. What about you? What's life like with the Grey Maiden?"

"Well, I love Daphne. She's like a mother to me, a mother I never had. It's just been the two of us for a long time. I had good friends in Newfoundland, but I've only sent a few letters, and it seems like we've grown apart. That's okay with me, it's hard to remain friends when you go to schools that are on different continents. I should at least be able to hang out with them next summer."

"Sounds fun. How much magic do you know?"

"A fair bit, actually. I've been working on a lot of advanced combat magic. Well, advanced for my age."

"Oooh! What spells do you know?"

"Most advanced is probably the Blasting Hex. I know the Stunning Spell, Striking Curse, Full Body-Bind, Shield Charm, and Disarming Spell," Harry said, ticking them off on his finger.

"Wow," Tonks said, her eyes growing big. "That's quite impressive for a First Year. Has Daphne taught you most of those?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I've read about most of them."

"So you are the studious type then?" Tonks asked.

"Yeah. I get great marks, at least when I'm well, and because I didn't have any friends, I spent a lot of time in the library."

Suddenly, there was a call from downstairs. "Nymmy! Harry! Dinner!"

Tonks made a face. Harry mouthed, 'Nymmy?' and she glared daggers at him. "Don't you ever call me *Nymmy*, or I'll hex some parts off your body that you haven't had the chance to use yet."

Harry gulped. "Alright then."

Dinner was interesting. Andromeda and Daphne seemed pleased their Harry and Tonks were getting along well and were heavily involved in conversation. Of course, dinner was not complete until Tonks had tripped and crashed to the floor carrying a tray of desserts, which broke and spattered everywhere. Tonks apologized profusely, but the damage was done.

After dinner, Harry excused himself and wandered to the Dressler Family Library. This was his best chance for figuring out who Flamel was, because the comprehensive library allowed the user to search for a name or topic by writing it down on special sheets of paper. Glancing over his shoulder, Harry took a piece of such paper and a quill and wrote, "Nicholas Flamel." The parchment vanished, and there was a hum of magical energy. Several books flew out of the shelves and landed on the desk.

Harry quickly opened one, and read.

Nicholas Flamel, a noted and powerful wizard, was best known for his work in the field of Alchemy, or transforming other materials into gold. His work with Albus Dumbledore is one of his crowning achievements, along with his discovery and use of the P-"

The book slammed shut, crushing Harry's right hand. He let out a cry of pain and pulled his fingers back. Some were obviously broken. He looked up nervously, and saw Daphne standing in the doorway, wand out, an expression of fury on her face that he rarely saw directed at him. Harry cringed, and not from the burning pain.

Daphne stalked forward, her emerald robes fluttering, and her face set and determined. She waved her wand and muttered, "*Episkey*." The pain in Harry's hand vanished, and the bones healed. She waved her wand again, and the books flew back to their shelves. She stopped in front of Harry and gazed at him, a piercing, cold gaze. He felt the sudden desire to sink into the ground. The disappointment, along with a touch of fear, was worse than if she had been screaming at him.

Suddenly, she locked eyes with him, and he felt a light touch on his mind. He jerked back in surprise. Daphne *never* used Legillimacy without his express permission. "I'm sorry I had to do that Harry. But I

needed to know. Suffice to say that I am greatly relieved I stopped you at that exact moment."

Harry hung his head in shame. He wanted her to just scream at him, but that wasn't Daphne's way. She never yelled at him. She used a tone of voice that indicated disapproval and concern, instead of rage. It was somehow worse. He *hated* disappointing Daphne.

"I told you not to pursue learning about Flamel, Harry. I told you it was for your own good, and you would do well to stop looking. What do you have to say for yourself?" she asked, looking more exasperated than anything. "You must understand, Harry. I'm doing this because I want you to be safe. I love you more than anyone else."

"I know. I'm sorry, I just let my curiosity get the better of me. I wanted to know what Dumbledore was hiding at Hogwarts," Harry mumbled, staring at the floor.

Daphne stepped forward and Harry flinched, but all she did was place a hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad you are sorry, and I believe you. Curiosity is not a sin, Harry. But you disobeyed me, and for that, I'm warding you out of the library for the remainder of break. I'm not sure how else to make this sink in."

Harry nodded dumbly, disappointment flooding his system. He'd been looking forward to being to access the Dressler Family Library. "Go to bed, Harry, we'll talk about this tomorrow."

As he exited, shaking his aching hand, he heard Daphne calling him back. "Harry?"

He turned around. "Yes, Daph?"

"I'm sorry about your hand. That was a mistake on my part. I wanted to prevent you from looking at information that might put you in danger, and I got a bit...overexcited." Harry nodded.

"I love you Harry. I'm just trying to keep you safe. I'll put out a Pain-Relieving Potion on the counter in the kitchen if you need it. That looked like it hurt a bit."

Harry nodded again. "It's okay, Daphne." She nodded at him, and he left the room.

Harry walked up the spiral staircase to the second floor, and headed for his room. He saw Tonks, dressed in purple pajamas, this time with long dark brown hair and blue eyes. She appeared extremely sleepy. "Wotcher Harry," she yawned.

"Hey, Tonks," Harry replied weakly.

"What's up with you? I heard a yell earlier; sounded like you," she said, yawning again and leaning against a wall.

"Yeah," Harry said, not meeting her eyes, "Daphne uh...caught me researching something I shouldn't. She closed the book magically and it broke a couple fingers in my right hand."

"Ouch," she said sympathetically. "What were you looking for?"

"It's best I don't ask you, or I'll get in more trouble. I've already been banned from the library."

"That's a *punishment*?"

Harry nodded.

"I wish Mum did that when I was bad."

"Not much of a book person?" Harry asked, yawning himself.

"I don't mind them, but spending my time in a library isn't my idea of fun. Not all Ravenclaws are bookworms, you know."

"I know that," Harry said tiredly. "I'm going to bed, g'night Tonks!"

"Night, Harry!" she replied, yawning again. She trudged into the bathroom and shut the door.

A/N: Well, you have to admit, that was considerably brighter than everything that proceeded it.

NOTE TO ALL REVIEWERS: I DON'T MIND CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM, BUT I DON'T LIKE FLAMING. I WORKED DAMN HARD ON THIS, SO IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DON'T READ IT.

Thanks to all of you who have reviewed.

Now, to clear afew things up.

Many people have been shocked by the level of abuse that Harry has recieved at school, and the lack of intervention by both Daphne and school faculty.

First, Daphne *doesn't know*. Harry is like canon Harry in this way: he doesn't like a fuss made over him, he's a stubborn boy, and he thinks he can handle it.

In canon, McGonagall was never anything more than friendly to Harry. While she has talked to Dumbledore, you may have noticedittakes quite a bit for the esteemed Headmaster to actually*do* anything. He may have acted sooner had Harry not found Hermione. He was geniuinly concerned about the Mirror of Erised.

Snape is anasty vindictive bastard. As will be explained later, he had a thing for Lily Evans. He was permanently scarred by both his father's abuse and James's bullying. That's why he joined theDeath Eaters. And no matter how much he hated him, what he did (giving Voldemort the beginning of the Prophecy), sentenced both the man he hated and the woman he loved to death. That the spawn of those two is a living replica of James Potter and had the gall to be sorted in *Slytherin* really irks Snape. He despisesHarry because ofguilt, anger with his father, anger with his guardian (to be explained later), anger with the Sorting Hat, anger with thedivinities...you get the picture. And the only way he can punish Harry is to take House points off his own house. Thus, he turns to mental and verbal abuse.

As for the students, re-read CoS and OotP for confirmation of what the Hogwarts student body can be like, and how they can turn on a person. They declare Harry an attention-seeking nutcase, the Heir of Slytherin, etc. They ostracize him and harass him with whispers and those stupid 'Suport CedricDiggory Badges," just to name a few cases. The Slytherins in this fic see him as a half-blood/blood traitor

who destroyed many of their parents masters and/or icons. Even if they weren't Death Eater, the pureblood thought Voldemort had the right idea (see Mrs. Black). Harry is also losing points from Snape, and helped along by Dear Draco, they believe he is actively antagonizing their head of house.

Then, in HBP, he's suddenly a perfectly sane hero and the girls are fawning over him. In other words, they are no better than Muggle children. JKR makes this painfully clear.

I hope that's answered some questions. JKR avoided any mention of abuse in any situation other than Snape's memories. I have no such inhibitions. I told you it was going to be darker, angstier, and more violent, and I intend to deliver on that. I hope you find my new plot ideas exciting, but the other stuff comes with the territory

Chapter 10: Christmas Surprises

True to her word, Harry began feeling an overwhelming desire to find something else to do whenever he even approached the locked Dressler Family Library. So, without much else to do, Harry spent most of his time with Tonks.

The young woman was a case study of contrasts. She could be as bouncy as a small child when after consuming noxious amounts of sweets, or she could rival the dead in inactivity. Most of the time, she was active, and while extremely clumsy, she was obviously very bright and quite knowledgeable. She wasn't quite the bookworm Hermione was, and seemed to enjoy pranks and jokes as much as learning. She was an average flyer, and while Harry flew rings around her, even on an old Cleansweep 4 (his Nimbus remained locked in the broom shed at school), it was mildly entertaining.

But one could not have a discussion with Tonks without the subject or her exceptionally rare ability coming up. Tonks could change every single feature of her body, save her height, and while she could take off weight, she couldn't take the form of anyone larger than her. Still, her ability to change her facial features was extremely uncommon. Only a handful of witches and wizards with Metamorphic abilities that exceed her own had existed in history. Tonks said possibly the greatest advantage (besides never having second thoughts about her appearance), was that she was almost guaranteed to get full marks on Tracking and Concealment for her Auror Exam. In addition, she had actually been highly pursued by both the Aurors and Unspeakables, and been accepted much faster than anyone else. She conceded that if Harry ever applied to Auror School, they probably would even *look* at his marks. Harry was pleased, for at this point, he wanted to follow in his guardian's footsteps. Personally, Tonks felt his advanced spell work was quite promising for his future that field.

Tonks spent a little more time talking about her abilities than she thought she would, because Harry was absolutely fascinated by them. She didn't mind, as long as Harry left her alone long enough for her to complete her holiday homework. She had actually taken a liking to the intelligent, mature eleven-year old. It was plainly obvious where

most of the aspects of his personality had come from. Just like Dressler, he was studious, observant, and mature, but he also had a good sense of humor and was a fun-loving child. She'd barely known the kid for four days, and yet she was already starting to think of the Grey Maiden's ward as a little brother of sorts.

She even showed him her natural appearance. She had her mother's pale blue eyes, the same pale, heart-shaped face that she used almost all of the time, a slender figure, above-average height, and long, mousy brown hair pulled into a ponytail. She explained that the hair was from her father, the only colors of hair that ran in the Black line were black and blond.

On Christmas Eve, Tonks's young and eventful life nearly came to an abrupt and extremely ironic end.

In the middle of yet another discussion about her abilities, Harry asked for sheer curiosities' sake what Metamorphmagi had to do to change. She described the basic steps. You closed your eyes, concentrated hard on what change you wanted, focused on the image of your altered appearance, felt a little charge of magic, and then opened your eyes. It came naturally for real Metamorphmagi.

Tonks was greatly amused when the eleven year old tried to do exactly what she had described, and nearly broke out laughing when he screwed up his small face in concentration. He opened his pale blue eyes, and was staring at her curiously. She laughed and said sweetly, "Nice try Harry, *but...you need...*"

Suddenly Tonks remembered something. Harry's natural eye color was NOT pale *blue*. It was emerald *green*. He had his mother's eyes. *Oh, Merlin...*

Harry opened his eyes and Tonks laughed at him. He shrugged inwardly. He'd felt a small charge of magic near his eyes, just as she had described, but apparently he didn't have any Metamorphic abilities after all. He wasn't sure why he had tried in the first place. *Wait, is she okay?* Tonks's mouth was moving, but no sound was coming out. She was taking deep, heaving breaths, and her violet eyes were bulging out of their sockets. Her hair suddenly started cycling through a variety of colors. Harry blinked.

"Harry," she said shakily. "Try it again. Try and make your eyes their natural color this time. And give me your wand." Harry was confused and handed her the wand, then closed his eyes and focused on his mother's beautiful green eyes, then on his own face. He felt a little charge of magical energy, and opened them. The blood drained from Tonks's face, and she gasped.

"Harry, have you ever done anything with your appearance? Anything that wasn't natural?" Harry shook his head, then froze.

He remembered something now. He'd been four or so. He'd had a nightmare that at the time he couldn't explain, one that he now knew had been about Voldemort. What had made it different was that after he saw the flash of green light, he'd dreamed of a pair of glowing, slit-like scarlet eyes. He'd woken up screaming, and Daphne had come to comfort him. But when she had seen him, she'd looked absolutely terrified, and it was only after she asked who he was and he confusedly replied that she had relaxed. She told him it was a dream and that she should go back to sleep. He had done so, and when he'd woken up, whatever had scared his aunt had been gone. He'd been frightened by the haunted look on her face, and when he'd asked, she'd knelt down and taken him by the shoulders, before wrapping him in the tightest embrace he'd ever felt. She'd said very quietly, "Your eyes. Lily's."

Harry broke out of his reminiscences. Tonks was still rather pale, and staring at him in shock. "Why do you ask?" he said slowly. Tonks shook her head.

"Just tell me."

"Well, there was one time...I think something about my eyes scared Daphne. I was having a nightmare about Voldemort." Tonks shivered at the name, but gasped for an entirely different reason. Suddenly, she lunged off the chair, and tackled Harry into a fierce embrace. She was crying...

"I don't believe it...I've waited so long, never found another." She released him, blushing fiercely, tears still streaking down her face.

"Tonks, are you okay?" he asked again, still not understanding.

"I'm fine. You are the latent Metamorphmagus. I can't exactly breathe very well right now. After all, I'd kind of given up a long time ago of ever meeting another one. Much less the bloody Boy-Who-Lived!"

"*What?*" Harry gasped. She couldn't possibly have said what he thought she had said.

"Harry, do it again. Close your eyes, think of them...say, violet, like mine. Just do it," she implored, leaning back against the wall." Harry complied.

"*Nope,*" she said, taking a heaving breath, "*green. Okay, try blue again.*"

Harry did. Tonks nearly went into cardiac arrest when Harry opened his bright blue eyes. "OH MERLIN!" she screamed, then tore out of the room and down the stairs. Harry hurried after her, and reached the top when he heard a series of thumps, a couple of profanities, and a groan of pain. He hurried downstairs and saw Tonks get up off the stairs and crash through the living room door. Daphne and Andromeda were quietly chatting in front of the fire. They both looked up at the breathless and bruised teenaged witch.

"*Nymmy?*" Andromeda asked. For once, Tonks didn't bother to correct her mother.

"Why didn't you tell him he was a Metamorphmagus?" she asked Daphne, pointing at Harry, who was standing in the doorway. Daphne blinked.

"Because I didn't know he was. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Because he changed his eyes from green to blue and back again, *twice!*" Tonks exclaimed, waving her arms wildly. "And he said something about his eyes...about this happening before." Daphne paled.

"I never thought...I didn't understand..." she mumbled. She looked up at Harry. "When you woke up, you *didn't* have Lily's eyes. You had these red slits. Red slits that I've only ever seen on Voldemort."

Harry matched his aunt's coloring. "I was dreaming about *him*," he said quietly.

Daphne nodded, but her face remained pale, and her eyes haunted. "I'd thought...I'd thought I'd lost you. That Voldemort had taken you from me. I was so scared until you told me who you were, and I knew you were still my baby." She pulled him into an embrace, then turned to look at Tonks. "So that was his abilities manifesting itself?"

"I suppose it was," Tonks said, thinking rationally for the first time since Harry opened his pale blue eyes.

"Interesting. I don't recall James ever having family with Metamorphic abilities, though I suppose it's possible. Are you going to try to train him? It's certainly a useful ability. Though Harry, there is one thing. No matter what you do, you won't be able to get rid of your scar, or fix your eyesight. That will limit you."

Andromeda spoke up. "Why's that, Daph?"

"Well, the curse scar is just that. It was created by magic, and is a physical part of Harry. As for his eyesight, while he can change his appearance, he can't alter his senses. Otherwise, I'd assume Tonks wouldn't be quite as clumsy."

Tonks sighed. "Merlin, if I could do something about that I'd do it without thinking."

Everyone laughed. "I'm happy for both of you," Andromeda said. "But shouldn't we try and be certain he actually is a Metamorphmagus?"

Harry frowned. "How would we do that?"

Daphne shrugged. "I'll do some research, dear. Maybe you ought to practice with Tonks." Tonks's face brightened at the idea. At the moment, she was in heaven. She already thought of the kid as a little brother, and now there was a possibility he possessed the same incredibly rare ability that she had. The same ability that had forced her to live the majority of her time at Hogwarts as a social outcast, befriended by only a handful of people. Charlie Weasley had been the first one to give her a chance. She smiled inwardly at the memory

of the stocky redhead. He was off tending to dragons in the frozen mountains of Romania. *And he thought being an Auror was a bad idea...*

She was broken out of her reverie by her mother. "I've got to start making dinner. Nymmy, why don't you and Harry start working on this?" Tonks nodded. The idea that she might be able to *share* her ability with another human being hadn't quite broken through.

As they left the kitchen, Harry began to ponder the possible consequences of his newly discovered ability. He didn't have much time to wonder before he was pulled into a fierce embrace by Tonks. Shocked, he was only able to pat the older girl on the back.

"Tonks, I know that you've never met another Metamorphmagus, but forgive me for asking. Why are you reacting like *this*?" he said, waving his arms wildly.

Tonks was initially furious with Harry for being so thick, but then she realized he really didn't know the extent to which she was ostracized by the Hogwarts student body, considered a freak that was only good for a laugh. *Or a shag*, she thought, remembering her sordid reputation from her later Hogwarts years. Fortunately, at that point she'd had several loyal friends, and it hadn't bothered her. It was true that she'd had a half-dozen boyfriends at Hogwarts, even if she hadn't bedded any of them.

"You don't understand Harry," Tonks said, shaking her head. "I was so lonely. I thought that my ability would be appreciated, but people either thought that I should be able to do other special things that I wasn't capable of, or they simply pressured me into amusing them. People I thought were my friends were just hanging out with me for a laugh." She sighed. "It wasn't until I met Charlie Weasley that anyone liked me for who I was."

Tonks was utterly shocked when Harry suddenly burst out laughing. Her shock gave way to fury, and she clenched her fists, advancing on the stupid, inconsiderate First Year. "You think it's *funny*, do you?" she hissed. Without thinking, her hand plunged into her robes and grasped her wand.

Harry stopped laughing and took a step back, his eyes widening in fear and horror. "Oh Merlin, I'm not laughing at you, Tonks. I'd *never* do that! I know *exactly* what you mean!" Tonks' anger faded a bit.

"So what do you mean by it?"

"I'm laughing at the irony. Charlie's brother Ron is the one who is making *my* life a living hell," Harry explained. "Think about it. Charlie, his older brother, was the first to reach out to you, to treat you well based upon who you were. Ron, on the other hand, is completely blind to me, except for the Slytherin badge on my breast and the lining of my robes. He thinks I'm a traitor, and he's turned all of Gryffindor House against me."

"I thought you said your best friend was a Gryffindor?" Tonks said. This was the first time Harry had really gone into any depth about his own problems.

"Hermione is a Gryffindor. As such, I had to save her life for her to give me a chance."

"Ooooh..How'd that happen?"

"I was walking back from the library on Halloween and ran into a troll that had Hermione backed into a corner. I made the intensely stupid decision to hex it and nearly got killed for my efforts. As is, the club hit me in the side. At least I gained a friend." Tonks grimaced.

"That's rough. I didn't quite save Charlie's life, he just stuck up for me one day when a bunch of Slytherins were harassing me. He was really nice, and after I had gotten to know him, I asked if I could hang around with him and his friends. He was fine with that, and we became really close. I even dated him 6th year, though that didn't work out well."

Harry and Tonks spent more time talking together before they were called down for dinner. After a scrumptious meal of turkey, they went to bed. Harry found himself wiped out, and wasn't even able to get in his daily reading before he was fast asleep.

"Wake up you lazy lump! WAKE UP!" Tonks yelled the last part, and Harry jumped, nearly falling out of bed. When he looked up and saw who it was, he groaned.

"Go away *Nymmy*," he mumbled into his pillow. Tonks didn't take being called by her given name well.

"Get up Harry! It's Christmas and I'm not waiting any longer to open presents! Anyway, I'm hungry! WAKE UP!" This time, she yelled into his ear. He swatted at her.

"Tonks, act your own age for once," he said tiredly.

"*Levicorpus!*" Tonks yelled. Harry let out a cry as he suddenly found himself hanging upside-down above his bed by his ankle.

"Damn it you crazy wench! Let me DOWN!" Harry yelled at her inverted image.

Tonks gasped as though offended, and began bobbing her wand up and down. Harry followed the path, his feet brushing the ceiling and his head hitting his bed. He cried out indignantly. He stopped when he heard hysterical laughter coming from the doorframe. Daphne was leaning against it for support, tears of mirth streaking down her face. From his ridiculous position, Harry scowled at her, causing her to laugh louder.

Harry muttered something fairly offensive, and Tonks turned red. "*Rictumsempra!*" Harry cursed as the Tickling Charm took effect, and began screaming in both rage and mirth all at once. Andromeda was now having to hold Daphne up before she fell to the ground, and the latter was gasping in between her hysterical laughter.

"STOP IT!" Harry managed to get out before the tickling got to him again.

"Say you-no-what, Harry," Tonks teased. Harry blushed in anger and embarrassment. "You-know-what" was something Tonks had made him say when he lost the 'tickling wars' the two waged on occasion.

"I..TONKS IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL...MOST BEAUTIFUL WITCH IN THE HIS...HISTORY OF THE KNOWN UNIVERSE!" Harry bellowed in between hysterical laughter. Smirking, Tonks canceled both spells, and Harry crashed headfirst into his mattress. When he got into a sitting position, he looked murderous.

"I'm going to kill you, *Nymphadora*," he hissed in mock-anger. Tonks yelped and ran out of the room. Blushing fiercely, Harry moved toward the door, and the two older women descended the spiral staircase.

Daphne caught up with Tonks, who was sitting innocently in an arm chair in front of the fire, beside the Christmas tree. "You have to come around more often. I've never seen anything that good in my life." Tonks beamed appreciatively.

"Your nephew deserves all the credit. He's my inspiration." This, of course, caused Daphne to burst out laughing again as Harry glared at both of them, turning red. Andromeda finally took pity on the eleven-year old and stopped both of them, and they began opening presents.

Harry didn't have many friends, and while he had sent a package with some wizarding sweets and pictures of Hogwarts back to his friends in Newfoundland, he hadn't yet received anything in return. He then realized that because they didn't know his real name, they couldn't anyway. *I wonder what they'll think when they get a parcel from Harry Potter, who looks suspiciously like James Dressler.*

For his only friend, Hermione, he'd thought long and hard about what to get her. A book, obviously, though that was risky because she owned so many. He'd browsed through a series of titles before giving up, and simply purchasing a 10 galleon gift certificate to use at Flourish and Blotts, along with instructions for how to use the Owl Order system the bookstore offered. For Tonks and Andromeda, he hadn't had the chance to get anything, and felt guilty for that. He voiced his feelings, but both told them they didn't mind, though Tonks smiled evilly as she did so. He loved the older girl, but she was just nasty sometimes.

With prompting from those around him, Harry began opening his presents.

The first was wrapped in red paper and was from Daphne. He opened it to reveal a box. Inside was a hand-made wrist holster for his wand which included a quick-release that required only a flick of the wrist to use. He thanked his aunt profusely, and Tonks expressed her envy. Harry also noticed the 'HJP-D' engraved on the bottom. He put the holster on, and it shrank to conform to his wrist size. He placed his wand in it, and practiced several times before he got the movement right. He turned to his next gift. He recognized the neat handwriting as belonging to his best friend.

He opened it to reveal two objects. The first was a box of Chocolate Frogs; Harry had grown rather fond of the delectable sweets. The second was a large, heavy, worn book on the history of the Aurors. Daphne approved; she said she had read the book before and found it quite informative and complete.

Tonks' gift came next, and surprisingly, it was a book. He opened it to reveal a rather battered copy of *Morgan Changer's Guide to the Metamorphmagus*. Tonks beamed as she explained that it had been her primary resource when she was learning to control her talents. On that front, Harry had managed to change his eye color to several shades of blue and green, though nothing beyond that. Nonetheless, she insisted, it was a start.

Harry thanked his new family and grabbed a Chocolate Frog out of the box with relish, beaming at both of Hermione's gifts. Unfortunately, Tonks noticed.

"A little enthusiastic there, are you Harry? You are a little young to have a girlfriend, though I suppose you have to start somewhere." Harry turned bright red.

"*She's not my girlfriend, Tonks.* Any chance you could stop behaving like a hyper eight-year old?" Tonks grinned evilly.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that, Harry dear. Because if I did, I'm afraid I only have two options to adequately punish you for second-guessing my maturity twice. First, I'll take your pants off and hang you upside-down from that rafter, or second, I'll put you in a body-bind and cast Rictumsempra. Your choice, Harry dear. Now, what did you say?"

Harry blanched. "Nothing, O great and beautiful Tonks," he mumbled. Tonks giggled, and Daphne started laughing again.

After she had calmed down, she began cleaning up the mess from the gifts, when she called over. "Harry, you missed one." Harry walked over and took the very light gift. He picked the note off the gift and saw it was for him, then he opened the gift. As the people around him gasped, Harry read the note that accompanied whatever it was.

Your Father left this in my possession before he died. It's time I return it to you.

Happy Christmas.

"Bloody hell," Tonks swore. "That's an invisibility cloak!" Harry looked confused, and his puzzlement deepened when he saw the tears in Daphne's eyes.

"It was James's," Daphne said quietly, her eyes glistening with tears. "I saw him disappear under that thing so often at Hogwarts. I never thought I'd see it again."

"*Harry!*" Hermione shrieked as she saw her best friend emerge from the crowd. She ran over to him and Harry's vision was obscured by massive quantities of bushy hair. Harry squeezed her back just as hard. She broke apart, grinning. "It's so good to see you again, I've missed you."

"I missed you too," Harry admitted. "But I've been busy—"

"Hello, what do we have here?" Tonks said conversationally. But there was a hint of mischief in her voice that indicated that her purpose wasn't entirely innocent. Hermione stared at her unusual appearance, she had platinum blonde hair that was spiked up and violet eyes. She did look quite disconcerting.

"Hermione Granger..." she said, not taking her eyes off this strange girl.

Tonks giggled. "I'm a Metamorphmagus, dear," she said. "And anyway, it's you we want to talk about. I've always wanted to meet Harry Potter's girlfriend."

Hermione went scarlet and ducked her head. Harry felt warmth flooding his cheeks. "TONKS!"

Tonks giggled again. "It's so easy, Harry. It's hard to resist."

"So, you must be Nymphadora," Hermione said nervously. She jumped back when Tonks scowled at her.

"I hate 'Nymphadora.' For the love of Merlin, call me Tonks." Hermione nodded.

"Stop it, Tonks, you are terrifying her. She's harmless, Hermione," Harry reassured her. Tonks glared at him.

"Oh really, Mister Potter. Is she so harmless that she didn't almost hang you naked from the rafters on Christmas morning?" Harry blushed and Hermione laughed.

"She really did that?" Hermione asked after clearing her throat."

"No, she only threatened to do that," Harry said, begging Tonks not to bring up what he had to say to stop her. Being the devil she was, Tonks wouldn't do anything of the sort. Sure enough...

"Oh, and according to Harry here, I'm the most beautiful girl he's ever laid eyes upon. Scratch that, I'm the most beautiful girl in the history of the universe," she said, batting her eyelashes and giving a dramatic sigh. Hermione looked quite puzzled.

"TONKS!" Harry said. "I only said that because you were tickling me upside down while suspended in midair! And because you threatened to give my aunt, yourself, and your mother a full view of me while hanging me from a ceiling rafter!"

Tonks looked like she'd been slapped, but Harry could tell she was faking it. "You...you don't think I'm beautiful, Harry?" she mock sobbed. Harry smirked at her.

"Oh, I think you are gorgeous Tonks. Especially when you aren't hexing poor, defenseless Harry Potter."

Both of them started laughing at their ridiculous antics, and even Hermione joined in.

After a hug and a kiss from Daphne, and a hug from Tonks (who also ruffled his hair, much to his displeasure), Harry and Hermione loaded their trunks into the luggage compartment and boarded the Hogwarts Express. They waved goodbye to their friends and family, and soon they were speeding through snow-covered fields on their way to Scotland.

Once they were away, Hermione broke the silence. "So, that was your Auror friend, Tonks?"

"Yup," Harry confirmed. "She's barmy, that one. But she's really sweet, also. She seems to think of me as a little brother of sorts. Despite the appearances, I hope I get to see a lot more of her."

Hermione asked some questions about Tonks' Auror training, and Harry answered them as best as he could. Harry also offered to lend Hermione the Auror book that Daphne had gotten him. Hermione showed him the two spellbooks that she had bought with Harry's gift. One was on useful charms, the other on offensive spells. Then Harry remembered something. "Hey, Hermione. Want to see something?" She nodded eagerly, and Harry shut his eyes. When he opened them, she gasped.

"You're...You're a Metamorphmagus!" she exclaimed. "They're so rare!"

"I know," Harry said, returning his bright blue eyes to emerald green. "Tonks was beyond thrilled; she's never met another one. I might not have her talent, though, and even if I do, I'll need a lot of training before I can do what she does. For now, I can only change my eye color, and only through a few different shades."

"That's still amazing!" she said happily. "Well, I guess you have another reason to hang around Tonks now."

Just then, the door to the compartment opened, and two Gryffindors peered in. Their faces lit up when they saw Hermione. Dean Thomas walked through, obviously not noticing Harry. "Hey, Hermione, why are you sitting her alo...Hello Potter," he said coldly. "C'mon Hermione, why don't you come sit with us. We've got a compartment with Parvati and Lavender." Hermione looked offended.

"Has it occurred to you that I have no desire to leave this cabin. Or the company I'm keeping. Harry is my best friend, and no matter what you say, that isn't going to change. You should just get over this silly House rivalry, Harry isn't like Draco Malfoy."

Dean and Seamus looked stunned that she wasn't coming. Dean simply shrugged, and they left.

Hermione sighed, and the conversation turned to what Hermione had done over the break. Apparently, skiing had not agreed with the bushy-haired bookworm.

When they reached Hogsmeade Station, the first person to greet them was Hagrid, who greeted them warmly, with a wide smile. The Gryffindors glared at them in response. They arrived at Hogwarts, and Harry and Hermione went their separate ways in order to get unpacked. Harry found his trunk and placed the things he had removed into his trunk. After dinner, he settled into his four-poster bed and spent the rest of the day reading, knowing Hermione was doing the same. He fell asleep dreaming of his two new best friends.

A/N: Just so you know, Harry doesn't have romantic feeling for either Tonks or Hermione. The last line might make it seem otherwise, but Harry is eleven.

I was sort of afraid of what the whole 'book closing' thing would do and I guess I was right. Daphne did *not* intend to cause Harry pain. She slammed the book with a spell, and overdid it a little, and Harry's hand was in the way. The reason Daphne acted the way she did is that she is absolutely terrified for her adopted son's safety. Between the troll, the broom, and the Prophecy, she's extremely paranoid. Remember, she's *already* lost her best friend and husband to the Dark. She *cannot* lose Harry. Sorry if she seems a bit harsh, but

she's under emotional strain, and her behavior reflects that. You did get to see what she's like when she's relaxed. If Petunia ever collapsed against a doorframe laughing good-naturedly at her nephew, I'll eat my laptop.

I hope you like my eighteen-year old version of Tonks. Based on her descriptions of herself, I think this is exactly what she would be like as a kid right out of Hogwarts. She still lacks the 'ability to behave herself.' I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. Imagine when she and Ginny get together to terrorize Harry. That's a scary thought.

P.S. I will try to go through the story and fix tiny errors like 'thestrals' and 'Botts,' but I don't have time for that now.

EDIT: ACK! This is NOT going to be HONKS! Especially not with this Harry! Please understand that.

Concerning Harry and Hermione's intelligence, they work as a complement to each other. In canon, something is mentioned briefly that explains exactly why Harry doesn't hurl himself into his school work. The Dursleys disapproved at best and punished him for at worst, beating Dudley in schoolwork. As Dudley is probably about as proficient at schoolwork as the pig he resembles, that wasn't very hard to do. For 10 years, Harry learned *not* to do his best. I believe that your life is above all else affected by your childhood, when you are the most impressionable. Hence the very different personalities between GM Harry and canon Harry.

HP canon was a bit too bloodless for my reading of the situation. Death Eaters are ruthless soldiers, not cruel, but idiotic, thugs. In my world, Harry would not have stood a chance against the Death Eaters at the DoM, even with the Prophecy. Because I'm damn certain that if Antonin Dolohov killed Molly's brothers, the Prewetts, who seem to have been excellent wizards, he wouldn't be taken down by a Silencing Charm and a couple of Full-Body Binds. Because if Harry and his friends can take them down so easily, why the hell are people so scared of Death Eaters? In Book 5, Harry is *not* battle trained. He basically knows the Full-Body Bind, the Disarming Charm, the Blasting Curse, and the Stunning Spell. Two of which he learned in his first two years, two of which he taught himself in 4th year. On the

other hand, if all the Death Eaters can cast the Killing Curses and Cruciatus Curses, then they'd win pretty easily. Wizard dueling has many throwbacks to real dueling, and injuring your opponent by drawing blood was pretty common. I think the Unforgivables are difficult to use, and even when you can use them, they drain a lot of magical energy. Which is why they didn't just kill Harry's friends. Still, there should have been a few more Killing Curses exchanged, especially because in HBP, the 'big blond wizard' is shooting them off like Confetti. Meaning he's probably very powerful (and yes, he will play a role in this story). If you are looking for Harry making a mockery out of trained wizards, look somewhere else. Voldemort doesn't just mark anybody who can hold a wand straight.

Oh, and when Daphne finds out what going on, expect sparks to fly. Of course, I'm not telling you when that's happening.

Yes, Snape is screwed up. But he's a damn good potions master (if not teacher) and he risked his life by spying on the Death Eaters after Voldemort's demise. Albus is trying to juggle Snape's personality issues with his promise of protection. We'll see how that goes. I get my inspiration for Snape from HP & TNoFP. Read about it in my bio.

Chapter 11: Norbert and Flamel

The first thing that Hermione mentioned the next day before breakfast was that her parents, who were dentists by trade, had never heard of Nicholas Flamel. Harry lamented the story about how he had nearly found out but been stopped by his aunt and banned from the library.

“Didn’t you find *anything*?” she asked desperately.

Harry froze. “Well, there was one thing. It mentioned Alchemy, which if memory serves me right, involves turning materials into gold-ACK!” Hermione grabbed Harry by his robe sleeve and began dragging him up flights of stairs. When they reached the seventh floor, Harry had a feeling of foreboding.

“Hermione, are you sure this is a good idea?” The girl wasn’t listening, and Harry could almost hear the gears turning in her head.

They reached a portrait of a large woman in a pink dress. *This must be the Gryffindor Portrait.*

“Daisy Fly,” Hermione spoke. The portrait, which had been sleeping, awoke with a start and swung open. Then she caught sight of Harry, and slammed shut.

“He can’t come in!” the woman cried. Hermione shook her head.

“Let him in. There is no rule against bringing a member of another House into your dormitory,” Hermione said confidently. The woman sighed, and the portrait swung open. Hermione grabbed hold of Harry’s shirt collar and practically threw him into a red armchair in front of the fire while she ran up the stairs, presumably to the girls’ dorms. “Stay there!” she shouted down at him, and he settled in, placing his feet on the table and relaxing.

He smirked as Ron, Fred, and George Weasley, followed by Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas began to walk down the stairs. They were talking about him.

“So then Potter says...WHAT THE BLOODY HELL?” Ron bellowed. Harry smirked up at him.

"Greetings, Weasleys," Harry drawled. After spending so much time with Tonks, his desire to mess with other people's heads had grown. "I don't recall saying that, actually."

"What are *you* doing—" Fred began.

"-in *our* Common Room?" George demanded. Harry smiled pleasantly at them.

"I was dragged in here by Hermione. I'm not completely sure why, I could have waited for her...oh, here she comes." Sure enough, Hermione came pounding down the stairs, carrying a massive book. Ron turned on her.

"What do you think you are doing, inviting a Slytherin into our Common Room? Have you no sense?" Harry snorted. He glared at him. "Think this is funny, do you?"

"Yes," Harry admitted, casually getting up. Hermione gestured for him to sit, and he sat back down. "You asking some one else if they have no sense is quite amusing, actually. Don't you agree?" he said, turning to Fred and George. They smiled evilly at him.

"Oh yes—" said George.

"-After all—" said Fred.

"-We suspect that—"

"-Ickle Ronniekins—"

"-was dropped on his head as a baby," they finished together.

"I can't believe you are taking his side!" Ron cried indignantly. Hermione finally reached their location, and set the book down on the table. It hit with a lump THUMP that rattled the table.

"Blimey Granger—" Fred said.

"-are you going to kill someone with that?" George asked.

She scowled at them. "Only your brother if he doesn't keep quiet."

"I'm not going away until he leaves." He drew his wand as he spoke, but it was pointing at the floor. Harry decided now was as good a time as any to show off his new toy, and he flicked his wrist, sending his holly and phoenix feather wand in his right hand, which was pointing at Ron. He winked, before sliding the wand back up his robe sleeve, where it clicked back into the holster.

Ron stomped off, infuriated, his brothers heckling him mercilessly. Dean and Seamus followed. Harry sighed when they left. "Now that those clowns are gone, do you mind explaining to me why you dragged the most hated student in the school into the Gryffindor Common Room?"

She flipped open the massive book, and Harry caught a glimpse of its title: *A Detailed History of Alchemy*. She flipped the book open, and found the passage she was looking for. "There!" she said triumphantly, pointing with her wand.

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal. There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera-lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth Birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

Harry sucked in a breath, then let it out. "Bloody hell, no wonder someone's trying to steal it. First the Gringott's thing, now the dog...and Snape," he said, a few pieces of the puzzle beginning to fall into place. Hermione looked baffled. Harry looked at her.

"There was a break-in at Gringotts the day that Hagrid removed the Stone. They got into the vault, which is incredibly difficult to do. Dumbledore moved the thing just in time. And Snape...Snape was limping after the troll incident, remember?" Harry tried to recall the memories of the night he'd been attacked by the troll, but found his memories blurry. Hermione's eyes lit up.

"I remember! His leg was all torn up and bloody. I didn't think much of it at the time. He must have tried to get past Fluffy!"

"That's ridiculous name," Harry breathed. "But I don't think so. I hate Snape more than anyone in the castle, but I know one thing: the man is loyal to Dumbledore. I don't know what the story is there, but while I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him, I don't think he's after the Stone. He must have realized the troll was a diversion, and headed off the real thief." Harry paused, steeping his fingers and gazing into his best friend's eyes.

"The question is how...and why?"

The next few weeks flew by in a hurry, and soon all thought of Christmas break was forgotten. The First Years had thought they were lucky, getting off without any homework during the holidays. Unfortunately, the teachers simply piled in on after the students had returned.

Not that it was much of a problem for the two brightest (and most despised) students in the year. Harry and Hermione got their homework done on time and quickly, then spent the remainder of their free time fulfilling their duties as bookworms. The library had become a second home to both of them.

One thing that wasn't going quite so well was Harry's attempts to teach both Hermione and himself combat spells vastly beyond the First Year level. After hours of practice in empty classrooms, both were proficient with all the spells they knew, but they seemed to hit a wall. Harry had wanted to try some more difficult curses, such as Cutting and Slicing Curses, but found himself unable to perform them at all. From their reading, Harry and Hermione had learned that they required emotion to work, as well as magical power. It was likely that the two eleven-year olds were too emotionally immature and magically raw to perform them. Either way, the two could soundly trounce any student in their year.

Not that that was the reason they were learning them. Based on the suspicious events that had occurred at their school this year, both thought it a good idea to be prepared.

What did interrupt their cycle of learning and work was a one-line note from Hagrid on Tuesday morning.

It's Hatching

As soon as they had a free period, Harry and Hermione crossed the bridge and descended down the stone path to Hagrid's hut. All of the doors and windows were closed, and the room was a furnace. On top of the battered wooden table lay a large, grey-green egg. The egg was moving slightly. As it did so, Ron finally gave in and opened a window to let a little cool air into the sweltering cabin. Hagrid didn't notice. A small beak was poking out of the eggshell. Seconds later, the egg cracked open, and the tiny Norwegian made its presence felt with a high-pitched croak. Hagrid swooned over the nasty-looking creature.

"I've decided to call 'im Norbert." All of the other four people in the cabin stared in disbelief.

Then Harry saw something: a flash of blond hair outside the window. In less than a second, his wand was in his hand. "*Stupefy!*" The jet of red light struck Malfoy in the face and he keeled over backwards, dropping out of sight. Harry rushed out of the cabin, and levitated Malfoy's unconscious form somewhere near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, then calmly returned to the cabin, where the four people inside stared at him. Harry shrugged.

"Would you rather getting arrested for possessing an illegal dragon? I'm going to have to learn Memory Charms, I have a feeling I'll be needing them." Hermione gaped at him.

"Memory Charms? Do you have any idea how dangerous those are? You could try to erase the last five minutes and completely wipe their memories!"

"I know, that's why I'm not fooling around with them until I'm really good at them," Harry said. Weasley was staring at him, mouth agape? "What? Planning on having a bunch of flies in your mouth?" Ron shut it.

"How can you do that? First, you can perform a Stunning Spell, which is definitely not First Year magic, and second, you do it without thinking, on a member of your own *House* nonetheless."

Harry shrugged. "When you grow up with the Grey Maiden, you pick up some things." Seeing Hermione's puzzled expression, he muttered, "Daphne," and she nodded.

"So, what are we going to do about *Norbert*?" Neville asked, stressing the name of the dragon in disbelief.

"Well, I'm planning to keep 'im," Hagrid said stupidly. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Hagrid, you live in a *wooden* house. Norbert will easily exceed the size of said house within two months. You *cannot* keep him, else you'll be sent to Azkaban or expelled for your efforts." Hagrid paled at the mention of the wizard prison.

"He's right, Hagrid," Ron said, looking annoyed that he was agreeing with a Slytherin.

"But I can't just let 'im go. 'E's too little, he'd die," Hagrid moaned.

"I know!" Ron said excitedly. "Do you remember my brother, Charlie?"

"Oh yeah. He stopped by quite 'o bit, to see what interestin' creatures I had on me. Always brought that 'Tonks' girl, crazy one if I've seen one." Harry snorted.

"She certainly does have that affect on people. I met her over break." Hagrid smiled.

"Made another friend, eh Harry? That's good. Well Ron, why don'tcha owl Charlie and see what he can do? I think..." he sniffled, "...I think that Norbert would be happy at a dragon preserve."

The days passed in agonizing slowness. Draco had been glaring daggers at Harry recently, and Harry was starting to get the bad feeling that he remembered being stunned. That meant he also

remembered the dragon. Inexplicably, he hadn't gone to Snape, who was treating him the same as always. Well, a little worse, because now he had the 'brat-who-lived' and Gryffindor's resident know-it-all working together. Not just working together, but creating high-quality potions, no matter what harassment he heaped on them. Harry's observation skills had proved crucial in this regard. He was now adept at spotting Malfoy about to chuck an ingredient into his cauldron, an action that was halted by Harry's wand flying into his right hand. Snape hadn't caught him yet.

Finally, four days after the dragon hatched, Charlie wrote back. Ron, visibly straining, walked over to the Ravenclaw table and invited the Slytherin and the Gryffindor traitor to read the note at Hagrid's hut that afternoon. Harry helped out Ron by casting a security charm on it to prevent Malfoy from nicking it and finding out. The boy grudgingly thanked him.

After Transfiguration and DADA, Harry and Hermione joined Ron and Neville at Hagrid's hut. Neville looked pleased to see them, while Ron still looked suspiciously at Harry. He would also glance at Hermione from time to time then glare at Harry. If Harry didn't know better, he'd swear the redhead had a crush on the bushy-haired girl. *Which makes absolutely no sense...*

Ron opened the letter and read it aloud.

Hey Little Bro,

Sounds like you've got a rather unique problem. Norwegian Ridgebacks are very rare, and very dangerous, almost as dangerous as a Hungarian Horntail. Always knew Hagrid was a wee bit off his rocker.

Back to the point of the letter. We're more than willing to acquire a rare dragon like that, and we can afford to send a few of the handlers, including yours truly, over to pick him up. Why don't you meet us at midnight on Wednesday night at the top of the Astronomy Tower. Hope that isn't too much trouble. Just get it up there, and we'll take care of the rest. Owl back ASAP to confirm this.

Love,

Charlie

"Well, that settles that," Harry said after Ron had finished reading. "We'll send him away on Wednesday." Hagrid looked like he was about to cry, but he nodded.

Hermione looked concerned. "How are we going to get to the Astronomy Tower at midnight without getting caught? We'd lose so many points if we were caught!"

Harry smirked, then pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket (he had taken to carrying it around). He threw the cloak around himself and her gasps.

"Bloody hell, where'd he go?" Weasley asked stupidly.

"It's an Invisibility Cloak, Ronald," Hermione said, right as always. "Well, will it fit everyone and a box?"

Harry pulled the cloak off, folding it up and putting it back in his pocket. "No. I'd say two people and the dragon are the maximum. It seems to have the ability to expand, but I don't think it will cover all four of us and a large box."

"So then who's going?" Neville asked. "Not me, Gran would kill me if I got caught after curfew."

"Hermione..." Harry said, knowing what her response would be.

"Absolutely not! Do you realize the trouble I'd get in?" she huffed indignantly. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Well, do you realize the likelihood that one of us doesn't come back alive if you stick me and Weasley under that cloak? Silencing Charms can only do so much," Harry said. Weasley looked offended, but then shrugged, realizing it was true.

"But..." Hermione whined, looking for a way out. Then she sighed.

"Don't worry, Hermione. With the cloak and Silencing Charms the only way we'll get caught is if we ram into someone, and I assure you that won't happen."

After agreeing on the plan, Weasley slipped the note into a textbook and they left for dinner. Unfortunately, the next day did not bring good news. As Harry and Hermione were sitting out on the grounds, reading, Ron Weasley came plodding up, his face contorted in pain and his hand twice normal size with an unhealthy greenish tint. The two looked up.

"The bloody thing *bit* me! Merlin, I can't wait until we get rid of it!" Weasley said, much too loud. Hermione shushed him, while Harry looked at his hand.

"Hospital Wing, Weasley. Looks like Norbert's fangs are poisonous." Ron turned the same color as his hand, and ran into the castle.

If that had been bad news, it was nothing compared to what happened two days later. They were visiting Ron in the Hospital Wing, who wasn't convinced that Madam Pomfrey had bought the story about him being bitten by a dog. Worse than that came after that. Weasley looked in his bookbag and paled. "Oh bloody hell. I leant my book to Malfoy! And Charlie's letter was inside!" Harry rounded on him.

"What do you mean you left the letter inside? Does it have sentimental value or something? Why didn't you just *burn* it you bloody idiot?" Harry raged at him. *If Malfoy went to Snape...well, he was dead.*

"*Harry!*" Hermione yelled at him. "You aren't helping."

Harry fixed Weasley with a dark look. "If you get caught, you'll lose some points and get a detention. If I get caught, I might not survive the year. That's how much the Slytherins hate me. Hell, I doubt Nott and Greengrass will ever speak to me again."

"You're friends with them?" Ron asked suspiciously. Harry shook his head.

"We have a neutral relationship. Hermione is my only real friend here at Hogwarts. And Hagrid, I suppose," Harry admitted. Weasley looked surprised.

"C'mon, we have to get to class," Hermione reminded him, leaving Weasley to ponder the consequences of what he had done.

The night that Harry had been dreading finally arrived. With Ron laid up in the Hospital Wing, and Neville terrified of what his grandmother would do to him, it was up to a Gryffindor and a Slytherin to keep Hagrid an employed, free man. Harry snuck out of the Slytherin dormitory past his sleeping roommates, and donned the invisibility cloak, casting Silencing Charms on it and his feet as he did so. He snuck past Filch, and got out of the castle.

He found Hermione waiting by a huge crate, with Hagrid off to the side, sobbing loudly. Harry shushed him and told him it would be alright (though the thought of comforting a man about *losing* a dragon seemed alien to him), and quickly tested if he, Hermione, and Norbert's box would fit under the cloak. They did, though just barely. After Hagrid said farewell to Norbert (as the dragon ripped the teddy bear that had been placed in with him into pieces), they set off.

With the Silencing Charms and the cloak, they managed to avoid Filch entirely. They reached the correct wing of the castle, but froze when they heard shouting. Creeping forward, they saw that Professor McGonagall, wearing a green tartan nightgown, had Draco Malfoy by the ear. The pureblooded heir was wildly protesting his innocence, and talking about the dragon. It was plainly obvious that McGonagall didn't believe him, and Harry couldn't blame her: you couldn't make up a more unlikely scenario if you tried. It was fortunate that Ron had gotten both his book and the letter back, as Malfoy had no proof.

Hermione giggled at Draco's predicament, but Harry winced in anticipation of what he would do to Harry the next day, knowing that he got him in trouble. McGonagall dragged Malfoy off, and the strange threesome moved on.

Climbing the stairs to the Astronomy Tower was no easy feat, but luckily, the door was unlocked. They managed to get the crate to the

top and then both collapsed against a wall, exhausted. Even with a Lightening Charm, the crate weighed a ton.

Minutes later, five broomsticks flew into sight, ridden by five strange-looking people. Harry recognized the red hair of the leader.

"That you, Ron?" he called down. Hermione frantically gestured for him to be quiet, and he landed, along with a few of his fellow handlers.

"Where's my brother?" he asked. Charlie Weasley was shorter than his younger brother, more stocky like the twins, rather than tall and gangly like Ron. His face had so many freckles on it that he looked like he had a tan.

"Norbert bit him," Hermione explained. "He's in the Hospital Wing."

"*Norbert?*" a witch said in disbelief. Harry and Hermione shrugged. "Hagrid named him."

The witches and wizards then showed the two eleven-year olds the inventive harness they had rigged up to carry the dragon. They planned to hook up the box, fly to an empty area, then take the dragon out and let him stretch his wings on the way back to Romania.

After saying their goodbyes, Harry and Hermione waved as the dragon and its keepers flew off into the night. Their mission accomplished, Harry and Hermione excitedly hurried down the stairs....

And ran right into a very malicious looking Argus Filch, Mrs. Norris tangled around his leg, her lamp like red eyes eerily reminding Harry of a figure from his nightmares.

"Well, well, what do we have here...?" Filch said. Harry felt his blood run cold.

The Invisibility Cloak was still in his pocket.

Harry's mind was spinning as Filch dragged him and Hermione down several flights of stairs. Well, the Caretaker wasn't physically

dragging him, but the two First Years were walking lifelessly behind him as if dragged by an invisible leash. Hermione was muttering worriedly to herself, while Harry was trying to figure out how he was going to ask Daphne to transfer him.

They didn't even notice where they were going until Filch pushed the door to McGonagall's office open. She was in there, still giving a tongue-lashing to Draco Malfoy, who looked up at them in surprise, before a wide smirk crossed his features. Harry's heart sank. McGonagall's lips pressed into a thin line at the two students.

"Found them up in the Astronomy Tower, ma'am. A bit too young to be using it for what you normally see..." Filch said, grinning maliciously. Hermione blushed at the implications, while Harry's face remained as stoic as a stone wall.

"Well I never...I don't believe this! *Four students out of bed!* Two of them from *my own House!*" McGonagall said angrily. Harry looked around in surprise, and then spotted Neville Longbottom standing miserably in the corner.

"Oh Neville..." Hermione sighed.

"Well, I have no idea why you did this. Mister Malfoy was feeding me some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, and it seems obvious you tried to play a prank on him. Well, I believe a heavy punishment is in order. You *must* not be wandering the corridors at night. Especially now..."

"120 points from Slytherin, 70 from Mister Potter, as this is his second offense (she gave him a slightly apologetic look as his face paled), and 50 from Mister Malfoy. 100 points from Gryffindor, 50 each from Mister Longbottom and Miss Granger. I am very disappointed in all of you..."

"70..?" Harry breathed. McGonagall nodded. "Yes, Mister Potter, 70 points. And each of you will receive detention for a later date. Now get back to your dormitories!"

Harry didn't even say goodbye to Hermione, who appeared comatose. He simply turned around and left. Unfortunately, Malfoy was behind him.

"Nice going, Potter," he hissed angrily. "You've lost us the bloody Cup. I'd be running for your life now if I were you."

Harry spun around. "You know, Draco. Even if no one is going to believe me, you and I both know this is *your fault*."

"What?" Draco said, stopping.

"It is your fault. We would have not been caught if you hadn't been so determined to get me in trouble. You got caught by McGonagall, and she alerted Filch, thinking we were playing a trick. You may have gotten me in trouble, but I don't think losing 120 points was worth it, do you?" Harry asked, crossing his arms over his chest. Malfoy gaped.

"Speechless, Draco?" Harry taunted. Then he walked off, ignoring the stunned Slytherin, who had just realized the extent of his stupidity.

It was, Harry thought, a replay of his first few miserable days at Hogwarts. Having Hermione helped, but as soon as word got out that the half-blood, Harry Potter, had lost them 120 points (Malfoy's getting caught was blamed on him too), they made it their personal mission to make his life miserable.

Of course, that wasn't really much of a change. The Slytherins had been treating him like pond scum from the day he arrived. Snape was more vindictive than ever, and Harry and Hermione's potions grade had dropped like a stone. Malfoy and the other Slytherins actively sabotaged their potions, and Snape became exceedingly clumsy when handling the vials of their potion. To add insult to injury, the two were kept after to clean up the mess. Snape had given Harry detention for no reason at all on several occasions, and Harry was getting strange headaches whenever he was in a particularly bad mood. It felt sort of like when Daphne used Legillimacy, only less gentle. Harry said as much in a letter home, and she must have passed it on to Dumbledore, for Snape stopped doing whatever it was.

Besides being bruised from being shoved into so many corridor walls, Quidditch Practice was now a fight for survival. The Beaters used Harry as their primary target, and he'd had to get quite good at dodging Bludgers, as Bole and Derrick were hitting them with a little too much force, and intent. Flint, obviously, didn't try to stop them.

Harry still hung out with Hermione, as the two were too good of friends to be separated by something like this, but the strain was showing on both of them. Neville had also become an outcast, people tended to ignore him, and his fear of rejection kept him from socializing with Harry and Hermione.

As for Hermione, she was as quiet and subdued as Harry had ever seen her. She rarely raised her hand in class, and kept to herself. She seemed depressed, and told Harry that her parents had threatened to withdraw her from the school after getting a letter from McGonagall. She'd fended them off, for now, but felt the only way to make up for her transgressions was to earn top marks on all of her exams. That meant she and Harry were making a case to have a pair of bedrooms installed in the library. Besides, no one bothered them there.

As exams approached, so did Hermione's drive and determination to memorize every single word of her notes and textbooks. Harry didn't mind, though he found it a bit excessive.

Still, the possibly the worst occurred about a month after the incident. Harry had just been let out of a hellish Potions class, in which Snape had been making sarcastic comments over his shoulder in an attempt to distract him. When that didn't work, he allowed Malfoy to chuck a ginger root at his cauldron (which Harry knocked down before it got there). Finally, he vanished Harry and Hermione's potion for no reason at all, and gave them their eighth consecutive zero. Hermione looked ready to cry, and Harry was seething. Only a desperate attempt by Hermione to calm him down prevented him from hexing the bastard.

After class, things got worse. Harry ducked into an empty classroom, trying to collect himself. Hermione left to go to the loo. Harry was about to turn around when he heard the door open.

“*Expelliarmus!*” Malfoy yelled. Harry’s wand went flying out of his grasp, and Harry spun around to see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle advancing toward him. Draco had a murderous sneer on his face.

“You really thought you were going to get away from me, Potter? Really thought you’d avoid retribution. Get him, boys!” Draco ordered to Crabbe and Goyle.

The two junior trolls marched forward, and Harry found himself trapped. He ducked the first few blows, but Crabbe soon had a hold of him, while Goyle slugged him in the gut, then hammered him across the face. He was bleeding and bruised when the door slammed open, revealing an absolutely livid Hermione. She stunned Goyle, then set Malfoy’s robes on fire. He extinguished them and ran for it. Hermione grabbed Harry’s wand off the ground, and threw it back to him. Harry hit Malfoy in the back with a Striking Curse that had all of his anger and frustration behind it, and the blond-haired boy was sent flying through the air before crashing painfully to the ground. He took one look at Harry’s murderous expression and fled.

Hermione tended to Harry’s injuries as best she could, but Harry refused to go to the Hospital Wing. Luckily, he didn’t have any broken bones. She was absolutely furious and wanted to go to McGonagall, but Harry told her that Snape might get him expelled if he found out they were fighting. Malfoy had been humiliated, and wasn’t going to tell anyone. She unwillingly agreed to keep quiet.

A/N: Back to the pain and suffering. They find out about Flamel (and Harry gets to mock Ron at the same time - he deserves it), the whole Norbert Fiasco, Slytherins hate him again, and Hermione kicks Slytherin ass.

Next up, the forest. God knows what I can do with that.

Just because Harry didn’t grow up at the Dursleys doesn’t mean he doesn’t have issues. You’ve already seen how badly losing her friends and family has hurt Daphne. Harry cares for her as much as she cares for him. He isn’t likely to be happy with the people that make her miserable by taking these people away, and Daphne’s reaction to Lily’s mention (refusing to look her son in Lily’s eyes), is a constant

reminder. This Harry might be much more bitter than canon Harry. Harry knows all about his parents, and what wonderful people they were. He didn't in canon. So losing his parents, even though he has Daphne, may have hit him harder than you realize.

Yes, that's how Snape got screwed up like he is. So he's got good reason to hate James Potter, if not Harry. As for Daphne's revenge, think about what you know about the character, and how both she and Harry respond to stress. Harry hasn't been lashing out at people, he's been sticking his wand in the hollow of their neck and threatening them. Like mother, like son? She will yell a bit, I'll promise you that. But she isn't the Molly Weasley type, though she may seem like it at times. She's a Ravenclaw/Borderline Slytherin. Keep that in mind.

TNoFP Harry Potter and the Nightmares of Future's Past. Excellent fic, a great twist on the time-travel concept. To be blunt, he finally beats Voldemort, but finds that he's the only one left. All of the main character deaths have depth and are perfectly reasonable, as is the fashion in which Harry beats Voldemort. After talking with Albus's portrait in the ruins of Hogwarts, Harry finds a way to send his spirit back in time using a complicated ceremony. To complete it, he kills himself with the Killing Curse. Not revealing anything else, read the story.

I do understand why people don't like Ginny, but I don't think they understand how she got the way she was. The Chamber left deep scars, and it probably took her the whole of her second year to trust herself around her friends again. You think that's a little much? How would you feel if you were responsible for nearly killing four students, a cat, and nearly getting your hero and crush killed? Ginny doesn't seem to get much support from Ron, which is one of the reasons I don't like him. Ginny finds value in herself and confidence by dating. She goes with Neville to the Yule Ball, and while nothing happens, it's a start. Then she dates Michael Corner and Dean Thomas, trying to bury her crush on Harry (which she does), only to have it come flying back as mature attraction. Her character transformation from shy little girl to confident teenager (see OoTP when she comes flying through the door without a second glance at Harry, then pulls him out of his suffering and misery by calmly reminding him he is the only one to be possessed by Voldemort). I like

Ginny's fire, passion, and Molly-like personality. And I think she brings life to Harry's depressing existence.

Anyway, thanks for reviewing. Chapter 12 (this thing is 15 chapters) will be up this evening. For now, enjoy!

Chapter 12: The Wraith in the Woods

At dinner, they received notices that their detention would take place at eight o'clock, and that they were to go to Filch's office. After dinner, Harry and Draco headed over. Malfoy was furious with Harry, but just refused to speak with him. Harry was fine with that. When they arrived at Filch's office, Hermione and Neville were already there.

"Late, are we?" Filch said, leering disturbingly at them. "I miss the old days. No detention, no...we'd hang them up upside down by the rafters until they passed out. That's the way to punish students...I've still got the chains..."

"Shouldn't we get going?" Harry asked. Filch glared at him. "Quiet, Potter. But yes, let's go. You have a real *treat* waiting for you."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. He'd figured they'd be performing disgusting chores without magic. However, it appeared that whatever they were being asked to do, there was a potential for bodily harm. What else could excite Filch that much? Harry already knew the man was a Squib, and Harry figured that he was bitter that the same students that he cleaned up after had an ability he did not.

He soon realized Filch was leading them to the castle doors. He followed, still lost in his thoughts, over the bridge and down to Hagrid's hut, which was lit brightly. Standing in the open door was the large figure of the man that lived there. At his feet was his harmless boarhound, Fang. Hagrid carried a large lantern, a crossbow, his umbrella (inside of which Harry was certain were the pieces of Hagrid's wand), and a grim expression. "Yeh got 'em Filch? Hope yeh haven't been scaring 'em with those stories." He laughed. "Hey there, 'Arry, 'Ermione."

They waved weakly back at him, and Filch scowled. "This is supposed to be a *punishment*, Hagrid. No socializing with the *condemned*."

"Ah stuff it yeh dirty Squib! Get out 'o here!" Filch sneered and left.

"All right then, we're going into the Forbidden Forest..."

"The forest?" Malfoy said incredulously, "but it's *forbidden*, Dumbledore said so! I thought we'd be copying lines or something, this...this is *servant work!* There are...*werewolves* in there!" he yelled loudly. Harry did his best not to snort, but Hermione's intelligence was offended by Malfoy's last remark.

"Don't be stupid, Malfoy," she said in her bossiest know-it-all voice (intentionally), "werewolves are normal people except at Full Moon, and it isn't even close."

"What are we doing in there, Hagrid?" Harry interrupted the budding argument.

"Well, yeh see, there are unicorns in the forest. Wonderful creatures, unicorns. But sommat's been hurtin' them. Not very much that can do that. I found one dead the other day. There's another one, 'e's hurt. We're gonna find the poor creature and put 'im out 'o his misery." Hermione gasped.

"But unicorns are so pure and quick! Most creatures aren't Dark enough to attack them, and the ones that are can't catch them! What are we supposed to do?" she said worriedly. Hagrid shrugged.

"I don't plan teh have yeh stoppin' the creature, just findin' the unicorn. We better get goin', c'mon boys."

They entered the Forbidden Forest. As far as the eye could see were tall trees, the ground below them misty and dark. The moonlight cast eerie shadows, and gave the woods a sense of danger. Hagrid led the group, his lantern illuminating the path they took deeper into the forest. Beside him was Fang, with Neville close behind. Draco followed a few feet further back, while Harry and Hermione brought up the rear. Harry had his wand in his hand, glancing nervously about for any sign of trouble. His scar twinged occasionally. A sudden cold wind blew through the trees, and Hermione shivered. Harry gave her his cloak, which she wrapped around her shoulders.

They reached a part of the forest where the trees thickened, and stopped. Hagrid turned around, and drew two more lanterns from his overcoat, lighting them with the one he carried. He handed one to Neville, and walked back to give the other to Hermione.

"We split up 'ere. 'Ermione, Harry, yeh take Fang and go off ter the right. Malfoy, Longbottom, yeh stay with me. Keep close. Yeh two," he said, addressing Harry and Hermione, "send up red sparks with yer wands if yeh run inter trouble. Don't try and fight, yeh don't want ter get hurt."

They had not proceeded five minutes into the forest when then heard a yelp and saw red sparks shoot up from someone's wand. Harry and Hermione raced toward the sight, and found Neville embarrassedly trying to explain his situation. After he did, Hagrid was yelling at the Malfoy heir. Apparently, Draco had gotten ahead of Hagrid, hidden behind a tree, and startled Neville. After Hagrid finished telling him off for fooling around, he turned to Harry and Hermione.

"That's that. Harry and Malfoy, yer together..."

"No..." Harry said.

"What?" Hagrid asked, not having heard him.

"I said no. I'm will not go off on my own with Malfoy. I will not trust him with Hermione either. Keep a closer eye on Malfoy and Neville, but trust me, if you put us together, one of us at most will come out." Hermione spared Harry a disapproving glance. Hagrid looked surprised.

"Alright, 'Arry, yeh made yer point. Anymore fooling around, Malfoy, and yeh got detention with Filch fer a month. Now GO!"

As with that, they separated again. Harry and Hermione began walking away from the others, Fang nervously leading. Hermione now had her wand out as well, and they proceeded deeper into the forest. They soon had absolutely no idea where they were, only that they were far from Hogwarts. When Harry brought this up, Hermione showed him the Navigation Charm, which pointed a wizard's wand in the direction of where they desired to travel. Confident they could find their way out, Harry and Hermione proceeded deeper.

The tall trees of the outer forest had changed into knarled and rotten stumps along with twisted tree limbs that climbed high into the sky, moonlight peeking down only occasionally. They saw no signs of life,

though every snap of a twig, distant howl, or whistling gust of wind caused the two best friends to jump in surprise. They reached a dark pond, and Harry decided that Navigation Charm or not, he didn't want to proceed any farther.

"Hermione, we've got to go back," he said, the first time either of them had spoken in fifteen minutes.

"Harry, we'll be able to find our way back," she insisted, taking another step forward, extending the lantern to reveal yet another rotting tree root.

"Hermione! That's not the point. We've been walking for over an hour. I have no idea if we're even on Hogwarts Grounds any more. It's almost eleven o'clock, if we want to get back before midnight, we leave *now*."

"Alright, why don't we use the Navigation Spell. We might cover more ground that way."

Harry extended his wand, then laid it flat in his hand. "Point me," he commanded. The wand swung back slightly to the right of the path they had been traveling on. They started back. Hermione was quiet again, and appeared to be somewhat frightened. Harry would have held her hand if he could have, but she carried both a lantern and her wand. Instead, he moved over and put a comforting hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. She looked up at him in surprise, then smiled. "Thanks, Harry."

They proceeded over a downed tree, and into large indent in the ground, surrounded by gnarled roots. They descended the hill, and froze at the sight before them.

The unicorn they had been searching for lay dead near a large tree. Even in death, its silvery coat shined brightly. But standing over it was a wraith-like figure. As Harry and Hermione watched in silent horror, the figure lowered its head to a large wound in the unicorn's side, and began to drink the silvery blood. Hermione let out a whimper, alerting the wraith to their presence. Harry suddenly cried out as his scar burned fiercely, and he struggled to stay on his feet.

The wraith raised its head, unicorn blood dribbling down its front. It turned to face the two terrified and frozen students. With a wave of its hand, Hermione let out a whimper, then collapsed in a heap, unconscious. Harry didn't even register this, as his scar flared. He let out another cry and dropped to his knees. It felt like someone had stabbed a burning knife into his forehead. His eyes watered from the pain, and a scream of agony escaped him.

The wraith advanced on him, slithering along the ground in a manner that resembled a snake more than a man. As it approached, the pain multiplied. Harry fell forward, and was on his hands and knees. The wraith moved inexorably towards him, and Harry looked at Hermione, and knew he would never see her again.

He would never see Daphne again.

As that thought passed through his mind, he barely noticed a field of red-tinged magical energy emerge from his very skin. He suddenly felt exhausted as the field extended towards the oncoming wraith. His scar split open, and as blood trailed down his face, the red field expanded, and made contact with the black figure.

It let out a scream of agony and flailed backwards. It advanced again, and Harry felt his strength leaving him. He crumpled to the ground, but as he did so, an image of his mother and father standing behind him, an image ripped from the Mirror of Erised, flooded his thoughts. Harry was then blinded by the red light, which blasted out of his bleeding scar and shot forward, connecting with the wraith. It screamed again as it was knocked backwards. With one final malevolent glance, it fled.

The power of Lily Potter's magic began to bleed back into her own flesh and blood, and Harry's vision began to narrow. He tried to sit up, but fell back to the ground as his strength and consciousness finally deserted him.

Hermione awoke with a groan. She felt cold and wet, and unnaturally tired. Her mind was spinning, and she felt like she was going to be sick. She pushed herself to her feet, and began stumbling toward the

hill that led out of the indent. As she did so, she spotted a mop of unruly black hair.

Harry

She stumbled back down the hill, and ran over to her fallen friend. He was face-down in a puddle of something, and was out cold. She crawled over to him, and sitting up, she turned him over. She nearly screamed when she saw his face was covered in blood. At first, she thought he was dead, but then she noticed the faint rise and fall of his chest.

He was still breathing.

Fumbling around with her robes, she tried to wipe the blood of her unconscious friend's face so that she could examine him more closely. She did an incomplete job, but it was enough to see that he was deathly pale and sweating profusely. His scar, which appeared to be scabbed over, was surrounded by red inflammation.

She looked around, and fired red sparks into the air. She knew they were deep in the forest, and she might attract the wrong kind of attention, but her friend might not make it without some medical attention. She stumbled to her feet, and tried to haul Harry upright, so that she could carry him out of the forest. She failed miserably, as she was far too exhausted to lift him, and she collapsed on top of him. Tears began to fill her eyes at the prospect of Harry dying in her arms. He wouldn't survive the night, and who knew when someone would reach them.

Her eyelids grew heavy, and she passed out from magical and physical exhaustion.

"Bloody hell! They're over here, Hagrid!" Neville called over. He clambered down the hill into the small ravine, and hurried over to the two unconscious First Years.

Harry lay on his back, and the only sign he was still alive was his shallow breathing. His skin was deathly pale, and he was sweating heavily. His forehead was covered in blood, and his scar appeared to

have scabbed over. Hermione lay on top of him, face down in the dirt. Her breathing was also shallow, and she had a nasty looking cut on her stomach.

Hagrid let loose a string of curses when he saw the two students, and even Draco let loose a ‘bloody hell,’ unable to make a smart remark about the fact that Potter had a girl draped over him. The boy looked too dead to make snarky comments. Hagrid came down the hill and picked up the two small children, cradling their unconscious bodies in his arms. Then they set off for Hogwarts. They found Fang, who had apparently run off when whatever had attacked Harry and killed the unicorn had appeared.

As they headed for the entrance of the forest, a familiar sight presented itself for Hagrid. A creature with the upper body and torso of a man and the body of a horse. A centaur. More specifically, a centaur that Hagrid knew well, and one that wasn’t unwilling to help humans. He stood silently as he watched them approach. Hagrid saw him frown at the presence of Harry in his arm.

“The Potter Child should not be in this forest. Not at this time. A Dark presence looms...” the centaur said cryptically. Hagrid nodded.

“I think that ‘Arry and ‘Ermione ran into that dark presence,” Hagrid said darkly, glancing down at Harry’s blood-stained face. “Don’t know what it was, though.”

The centaur nodded. “Mars is bright tonight. Always innocent are the first victims.” At the moment, Hagrid was unsure whether or not the innocent was the two unconscious students he carried or the dead unicorn he had found lying across the clearing from them.

Hermione stirred in his arms, and started when she found herself off the ground. Hagrid tried to grab her, but the small girl fell out of his arms and landed hard on the ground. She groaned before she started glancing around for Harry. She saw him in Hagrid’s arms, and relaxed. “Sorry Hagrid,” she replied embarrassedly, pulling herself to her feet, where she began to sway, before collapsing back to the ground. Neville hurried over and turned her over.

"I could carry the girl," Firenze said. Hagrid stared. A centaur offering to lend direct aid to a human was almost unheard of. But as he said this, he trotted over to where Hermione lay, and bent down. Neville helped her onto the creature's back, and Hermione tiredly grasped around its neck. "We must depart. The Potter child is fading."

That got everyone's attention. They proceeded for fifteen minutes before they ran into a very livid centaur.

"Firenze!" Bane cried angrily. "What are you doing, carrying that girl like some common *mule*?"

"She is the companion of the Potter child. He is in Hagrid's arms, and the life will fade from him unless he is healed soon," Firenze said. "I will aid men against the Darkness, will you?"

"What have you been telling them? You know we cannot reveal our secrets to lower beings!" Bane cried. Draco snorted.

"Inferior beings? Humans are vastly superior to- OW!" he yelled at Neville punched him in the gut.

"Shut up you stupid git! Don't insult them when they're helping us! Do you want to die?"

That shut Malfoy up. Bane had heard the first, however. "It is you who are inferior, arrogant son of the Darkness. You do not see the future when it lies in plain sight. You wage war on one another to simply prove yourself in the right. Human kind is forever cursed with arrogance and stupidity," Bane said, glaring daggers at Malfoy, who gulped and walked back.

"We must depart," Firenze said again.

"I shall not forget this, Firenze. We will have words in the future. Now go, before the life fades from the youth." Bane trotted into the darkness, and they set off.

At the edge of the forest, they met a frantic-looking McGonagall and a concerned-looking Snape. Both paled when they saw Harry and Hermione unconscious.

"What is wrong with Potter, Hagrid? What happened?" Snape demanded.

"Dunno, Professor. Ran inter whatever was killin' the unicorns, sommat Dark. Found these two unconscious near the dead unicorn."

McGonagall, if it was possible, paled further. "Dead unicorn? Something had been *killing* the unicorns? And you sent *students* after it? Hagrid, are you mad!"

"Obviously," Snape replied, though his voice lacked the usual malice as his eyes locked onto the unconscious form of the spawn of the woman he loved and the man he despised. A strange emotion passed in his eyes. At the moment, the boy was his charge, his Slytherin.

"Let's get them to the Hospital Wing." He eyed the centaur. "All-Seeing Centaur, please relinquish your rider," he said politely. The centaur looked surprised at being addressed in such a way, and bowed to let the girl off. She exhaustedly pulled herself off, patting the creature's flanks in thanks. Minerva hurried forward and picked up her student.

They hurried up to the Hospital Wing. Severus told Draco to get to bed, and Hagrid took the Longbottom boy, the bane of his existence in Potions, to his own dormitory. Severus accompanied Minerva to the Infirmary with the two students. Granger was fading in and out of consciousness, and appeared to be unnaturally exhausted, as if she hadn't slept in days, something that obviously wasn't the case. Potter was still out cold, and his skin was pale and pallid. His body temperature was alarmingly low, though he was still breathing, the only thing separating him from a corpse.

They awoke the Hogwarts Matron, who immediately got the two into hospital beds. Remarking something like, "Third time's the charm," she set to work healing the two students. She immediately diagnosed Hermione with severe magical and physical exhaustion. A check of her wand by Minerva showed she hadn't used anything more strenuous than a Lighting Charm, complicating the mystery.

Potter was more of an enigma. Like his friend, he had severe magical and physical exhaustion, but something else was wrong. It was like the life was seeping slowly from his body. Pomfrey dumped a half-dozen potions down his throat and prayed to Merlin that he would recover. There wasn't much else to be done. Granger finally succumbed to the Sleeping Potion, while Minerva buried her nose in several books on Magical exhaustion, trying to determine what had happened to her prize students.

Dumbledore finally showed up with his phoenix. Severus watched in astonishment as the bird flew over to Potter, landing on the pillow beside his head. With a talon, it gently brushed the hair away from Potter's forehead, revealing a blood-crusted scar that made Severus shiver at the sight for some reason. Fawkes laid its beautiful head on the scar, and a pair of pearly, thick tears landed on the wound, which hissed and smoked. Potter stirred in his sleep. When the hissing faded, Potter's forehead was back to normal, the scar only faintly visible. His color began to improve almost immediately. Severus shook his head.

"It appears your Phoenix may help the Golden Boy survive the night," Severus commented, falling back into his role of cold and sarcastic Potions master.

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling with bemusement. "Do you really believe that will fool me, Severus? You showed genuine care for the boy. Perhaps you have begun to see that outside of his flying abilities and his courage, the boy is his mother's son?"

"He looks just like Potter," Snape said, spitting the last word as if it was a curse.

"Except his eyes," Dumbledore said, "Lily's eyes. Of course, the person he resembles the most is neither of his parents."

"The boy screams Dressler, from the emotional mask he wears to his fierce loyalty to those close to him. To his intelligence and academic drive," Snape admitted his eyes still on the boy.

"Indeed. I was unsure of how Harry would come out after being raised by Daphne. I feared he would return with a large head and an

advanced knowledge of curses. It seems Daphne did indeed know what was best for him after all."

"He doesn't know the Prophecy. The Prophecy that I am certain you possess the full contents of." Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling.

"You know I cannot tell you that, Severus. Suffice to say that I recommend you never mention your role in the entire affair."

Severus stiffened as he remembered that night. The night he had been eavesdropping outside the door of a private room in the Hog's Head. A night where he had overheard the only genuine prophecy that Sybil Trelawney had ever made in her entire life. He had been ejected from the bar by the owner before he heard the full contents. He had reported to his master, who after brief consideration, had determined that a one-year old baby boy was all that stood between himself and immortality.

He had signed the death warrant of the woman he loved. It was on his information that Voldemort traveled to Godric's Hollow and murdered the Potters. He had lost the woman he loved, and the master he served. And that was how he came to be in Dumbledore's service.

"I shudder to think of what Daphne would do to me if she knew," Severus said after a long pause." Dumbledore nodded.

"As cool and collected as she can be, she spares no expense in defending her friends and family. I doubt she would allow you to live. And I doubt that I could stop her."

Snape looked upon the unconscious form of Daphne's ward again. He hated the boy, because of who he came from. His very existence was a slight to Severus Snape. And yet...

"He is of your own House after all, Severus. Perhaps you should seek to discover who he is, rather than where he came from." And with that, Dumbledore left the room, leaving Severus Snape standing alone with only the two unconscious students for company.

Hermione's strength didn't return until two days had passed, and McGonagall had no idea what type of spell or enchantment that she had been hit by. Harry remained unconscious, his magical levels slowly and painstakingly rebuilding themselves. The rumors had spread through the school that they had been trampled by a herd of centaurs, bitten by werewolves (never mind that the full moon was weeks away), or that they were dead, and Dumbledore was covering it up.

Hermione was restricted to her bed for several days, and spent most of the time catching up on schoolwork. Harry finally awoke four days after he was found in the forest, and was able to give a rather disturbing account to the Headmaster.

Albus sat at his desk, a dozen different magical instruments in front of him, trying to uncover what had happened to Harry and his friend. Harry had described a wraith-like creature, one that seemed to resemble a Dementor. But Dementors didn't consume unicorn blood, nor did they have the capacity to knock an eleven year old girl unconscious by draining their magic with a wave of a hand. Only an extremely powerful Dark wizard could do such a thing. This brought Albus back to where he had begun. Voldemort. The ramifications of such a possibility were not lost on him.

That Voldemort was in the Forbidden Forest, and had an opportunity to strike at the eventual savior of the wizarding world was disturbing to say the least. More disturbing was that Albus had not detected it sooner. A Lord of Voldemort's power normally had an aura of darkness that someone of comparable power, himself, should be able to detect without difficulty. The fact that Albus detected no such presence meant that the Dark Lord had not returned to body. He still existed in the spirit-form, a condition made possible only by the countless Dark rituals Tom Marvolo Riddle had performed to strengthen his magic and life force. Albus was unsure of how far Tom had been on his road to immortality, but he could not be killed like a normal man. The fact that he had survived the Killing Curse proved this. And that a mere ten years after Halloween 1981, he had returned to Hogwarts, the Bastion of Light.

More disturbing was the behavior of Albus's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Quirrell. When Albus had first met him, the young man had been energetic and knowledgeable, a fearless man who had ambition and power. What had arrived at Hogwarts for the teacher orientation had been an entirely different creature. The man was terrified of his own shadow. Many attributed it to a run in with a vampire, but Albus suspected a darker reason. He believed that the man had had a run-in with Lord Voldemort, and he feared that the man was now serving him as a spy and agent. He did not know if he had taken the Dark Mark, not that it was necessary.

The man's behavior had been suspicious to say the least. Severus felt a burning in his own Mark whenever he was near, and a presence that he associated with Lord Voldemort. He confirmed that Quirrell had not been among the ranks of the Death Eaters at the time of Voldemort's fall, but that the vibes he detected from him could rival those of Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov, two of Voldemort's most senior Death Eaters, both of whom were incarcerated in Azkaban.

And then there was Snape's insistence that the man had nearly killed Harry Potter twice. Once, by jinxing the boy's broom with a Dark hex so powerful that Snape's counter-spell had merely bought the boy time to decrease his altitude and avoid falling to his death. And also that the entrance of the troll into the dungeons on the night of Halloween had coincided with the night that Severus had discovered a hooded figure attempting to break through the defenses surrounding the Philosopher's Stone. Professor Quirrell had a reputation of being very gifted with trolls, a fact that did not escape Albus. In any case, the troll had nearly killed young Harry Potter, who had happened upon it on the way back from the library. On the other hand, the event had solidified a friendship between him and Miss Granger, one that filled a gaping hole in the boy's social life.

And now the events of the forest. The creature that Harry had seen and been attacked by had been drinking unicorn blood. Albus knew the ramifications of this as well as anyone. While drinking the blood of a unicorn could keep you alive even an inch from death, killing such an innocent creature resulted in the drinker being cursed with a half-life, vacant of purpose and full of pain. Of course, if Lord Voldemort

really did seek to obtain the Philosopher's Stone, such a problem would be a minor annoyance; Tom had been living a half-life for many years. The man wasn't human anymore.

A/N: One of you wished that I had made Harry not forget the Invisibility Cloak. Well, this chapter in both my fic and the canon book is extremely important to the plot.

I know that a bunch of you will question the specifics of Lily's magic and such, so fire away and I'll do my best to answer them next update, which will be tomorrow. I'll say now that the magic she gave to him when she died can extend beyond his body in my fic. Oh, and Voldemort realizing the consequences of the blood magic will effect the climax in the Stone chamber.

Thanks to Shabopo, I know I'm not supposed to respond to each and every reviewer. That said, I need to have sizable author's notes so that everyone has a clue what's going on. So, I'll be deleting my review responses in previous chapters, for I have no wish to have my fic erased.

I'll promise that Ginny Weasley and Harry will be friends for a long time before they begin a relationship (that won't necessarily be steady). Hermione will NOT be learning the Dark Arts, it doesn't fit her character. Harry on the other hand has the potential, something that will be elaborated on later. Think about what I said about Daphne's sorrow and Harry's bitterness.

Next up: Our duo gets mangled in my version of the PS obstacle course (yes, it will be more deadly - if three untrained first years got through it, I call that pathetic).

Chapter 13: Date With Destiny

Hermione showed her true colors the day that she and Harry were finally released from the Hospital Wing. True to her studious nature, she was far more alarmed by the fact that exams were a week away as opposed to the fact that the two had spent almost a week in the Hospital Wing with a case of magical exhaustion, a condition extraordinarily uncommon for eleven-year old witches and wizards. Nor was she worried that neither one had any idea what had actually attacked them. All they knew was that they had escaped without permanent damage, and that Hermione had her mind into first gear.

What was wearing on his mind was that his nightmares had resumed in full intensity. He'd finally caved to Hermione and talked about it, but it didn't seem to make any difference. Her suggestion was to go to Madam Pomfrey for Sleeping Potions. Harry decided against that course of action.

But what most concerned Harry about this latest binge of nightmares was that they were accompanied by a fierce burning of his scar, and his scar continued to twinge throughout the day.

If one thing had improved, however, it was his social standing. He had gone from being despised to simply ignored. Snape had allowed Slytherin to make up a great deal of the lost points, and a victory in the Quidditch Cup would give them a fighting chance for the House Cup. Malfoy and his cronies still appeared to be remembering the last time they had attacked Harry and Hermione, and kept their distance, much to the duo's delight. Ron Weasley and his Gryffindors were as nasty as ever, creating rumors of Harry's proficiency and use of the Dark Arts, along with rumors that he had used a Compulsion, a form of Dark Magic, to ensnare Hermione. Harry figured that if anyone was stupid enough to believe that, it wasn't worth the effort of setting them straight.

Flint's Quidditch practices continued to be a fight for survival, somehow increasing in intensity until the day of the final match, against Hufflepuff. Sprout's House Team was a mix of veterans and younger students, including a promising third year named Cedric Diggory. The day of the match dawned cold and clear, perfect

weather for Quidditch. Many of the Fifth and Seventh Years, who had barricaded themselves in their dorms to study for their OWLs and NEWTs respectively, emerged for the second to last match of the year.

The match, which had been expected to be a pushover and an easy victory for Slytherin, turned into a battle. Bole and Derrik played as poorly as they had played well in the previous match, and the Slytherin Chasers (including Flint, who had committed two fouls taking out his frustration on the Hufflepuffs) appeared to have coated their hands in Slippery Solution, as they were incapable of holding onto the Quaffle. Incredibly, the Hufflepuffs had the lead, and were beginning to pull away. Bletchley was doing her best, but she had no help, and the score was 170-50 as Flint ended his fifth timeout. He had threatened the entire team with bodily harm if they didn't dramatically improve, neglecting to mention that he was playing as badly as any of them.

Harry patrolled high above the field, searching for the Snitch. For once, the opposing Seeker wasn't trailing him; Diggory was off on the other side of the field, searching on his own. He thought he spotted a golden glimmer near the Ravenclaw stands, but it was gone before he could blink. Another Hufflepuff Chaser scored to make it 180-50. If Harry didn't catch the Snitch soon, he'd have to wait for the Slytherins to score before he could even pursue it. Finally, he spotted it, and took off after it, flying full speed toward the Teacher's Stands. It flew away, heading back for the middle of the field, and Harry was on it all the way. He checked the score, and saw that it was 190-50 as his fingers closed on the struggling winged ball.

It was over. Slytherin had narrowly avoided disaster, 200-190. Flint was bellowing at the entire team, berating them for their poor play. Despite the victory, and their 2-1 record, the Slytherins needed Ravenclaws inexperienced team to pull a miracle and beat Gryffindor by a whopping 200 points if they were to retain the Quidditch Cup.

Desperate to avoid Flint's tantrum, Harry flew away from the pitch, down towards the Forbidden Forest. He spotted two figures at the edge, and flew down, hiding out of sight behind a large tree.

It was Snape and Quirrell. They appeared to be arguing about something.

“...You don’t want me as your enemy, Quirrell. Now have you figured out how to get past the mangy mutt or not?” Snape demanded.

Quirrell stepped away nervously, “I-I d-d-don’t know w-w-what y-you are t-t-talking about, S-S-Severus,” he stuttered. “I-I-I am I-I-Innocent.”

Snape glared at him with unadulterated hatred. “You fool no one, Quirrell,” he spat. He sneered at the trembling man, “You are serving him, though I cannot imagine why he would you a sniveling fool such as yourself. Now tell me!”

“I-I-I w-w-won’t, S-S-Severus!” Quirrell shouted, thought the stuttering ruined the effect considerably.

Snape laughed nastily at him. “Albus suspects you, but does not plan to act. You know what I can do, Quirrell. You know what I want, and what I will do to get it! Potter and his mudblood friend have been a thorn in both of our sides, yet who decided to remove him?”

Quirrell stumbled backwards, his hands flying up to prevent his turban from falling. “I d-d-don’t know w-w-what y-y-you are t-t-talking about, S-S-Snape!”

“You feel it, don’t you. The pull of the Dark Lord, the subtle burning. I am not a fool, Quirrell. You will break soon.” He stormed away in a hurricane of black cloaks, stalking for the castle. Quirrell stood there, terrified, then fled.

And above them, Harry Potter tried desperately to figure out the meaning of what he had just overhead.

One way to look at it was that Snape was serving Voldemort, and that he was attempting to intimidate Quirrell to give him help in getting past the obstacles that guarded the Philosopher’s Stone. Snape had been downright nasty, and made several blatant threats, promising pain and misfortune if the man continued to defy him.

But on the other hand, while he didn't trust Snape, he believed the man was extremely loyal to Dumbledore. He wouldn't attempt to steal the thing that Dumbledore was protecting to present to his vanquished master. As hateful and vicious as the Potions Master was, Harry didn't believe he was at the present time a Dark Wizard.

But if that was true, it meant that *Quirrell* was the Dark Wizard, and the one trying to steal the Stone for Voldemort. On the surface, the thought was laughable. Harry had never seen the man successfully perform a single spell, and learned almost nothing in his classes. He doubted that the man could execute a spell without stuttering in fear. But why had Snape said that Dumbledore suspected not him, but *Quirrell*?

Unfortunately, Hermione wasn't particularly useful in clarifying what Harry had overhead following the Quiddich game. She agreed with both of Harry's personal scenarios, but couldn't find enough evidence to prove or discount either one of them. A major piece was missing to the puzzle. At the present time, they were walking along the grounds, discussing some extra reading they'd been doing in Transfiguration. They saw Hagrid feeding some of the cows that were held in pens around his hut. He called over to them.

"Arry! 'Ermione! Yeh feelin' better?" he asked kindly. Harry and Hermione approached the gentle giant and sat down on a pair of convenient tree stumps.

"Much better, thanks Hagrid," Harry said cheerfully. "Missing Norbert?" he asked absently.

Hagrid sniffled. "A bit. He was a good dragon, but 'e's happy now, with a bunch 'o other dragons. I'm sure 'e's enjoying the preserve in Romania." Harry and Hermione nodded understandingly, though neither could comprehend the large man's fascination with such deadly creatures.

Harry suddenly had something that had been bothering him come to the front of his mind. "Hagrid, the man who gave you the dragon, what did he look like?"

"Dunno," he responded, "He didn't take 'is cloak off. That's not too uncommon fer the Hog's Head, bunch 'o shady characters hand around there." Harry felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

"Hagrid, did the man express any interest in the creatures you handled?" asked Hermione, catching on to where Harry was going.

Hagrid wasn't, however. "O course! He asked about me favorite, Fluffy. And I told 'im, "all yeh gotta do is play some music and 'e'll fall right ter sleep." His expression suddenly changed to horror. "Shouldn'ta told ya that! Hey, where yeh goin'?"

Harry didn't even bother to respond, and neither did Hermione as they raced for the castle. As they ran, Hermione asked, "Do you think that person was Snape?"

"Or Quirrell," Harry said as they entered the bridge. "We need to find Dumbledore. Hagrid can't hold his liquor, and he told whoever wanted the Stone how to get past Fluffy. There are probably other spells and enchantments, but getting past that monster has to be one of the toughest obstacles."

They ran into the castle, and headed straight for the Headmaster's office. They stopped in front of the gargoyle, realizing they didn't have the password. As Harry began to rattle off the name of various Muggle sweets, they heard McGonagall behind them.

"What are you two doing in here? Professor Dumbledore has been called away on urgent Ministry business. Why do you need to see him?" she asked, glaring at Harry suspiciously.

Harry sighed. "It's about the Philosopher's Stone. Someone plans to steal it!" he said desperately. McGonagall paled and dropped the books she had been carrying.

"Steal it! I don't know how you two found out about the Stone, but I assure you that no one but Dumbledore can access it, it is far too well protected. Now I don't want to see you in here again. Go outside with all of the other students, and not another word about the Stone!"

Harry and Hermione wandered through the halls, finally stopped in a dark corridor. Harry backed into the wall and slid down it. "Well, she didn't believe us, and Dumbledore's gone. We've only got one choice."

"What? What are you planning, Harry?" Hermione asked suspiciously, dropping to one knee so that she was face-to-face with her friend.

"I'm going after it tonight. My scar has been burning like hell all day. The day is near where Voldemort will go after it. I don't have a choice," he said, staring into his friend's horrified eyes.

"Harry, are you mad? You don't stand a chance!" she cried. Harry sighed.

"Hermione—" he began.

"I'm going with you," Hermione said with determination. "You can't do this alone."

"Hermione, this is dangerous. If we get caught—"

"That's the least of our concerns. We're First Years, albeit First Years with advanced knowledge of combat spells, going up against defenses designed to be foolproof, created by Hogwarts Professors. I wouldn't be worrying about what Filch can do to you. Oh Harry, do you have to do this?"

"Yes. He killed my parents, Hermione. I can't allow him to rise again."

And that was that. That night before dinner, the two friends made plans to meet in the Forbidden Corridor at midnight. Harry would sneak through the secret staircase, and Hermione would use his invisibility cloak. Harry didn't even touch his food, as his mind continued to anticipate what he would be facing in a few hours.

Harry arrived in front of the door of the Third Floor Corridor without a hitch, and waited for Hermione. He heard her approach, and silently berated her for forgetting the Silencing Charms.

"I heard you," he whispered. She pulled the Invisibility Cloak off and glared at him.

"I wasn't caught," she protested. "Besides, I ran into some problems. Namely, I ran into Ron Weasley. I had to Stun him," she said.

Harry smirked. "Serves him right." His expression became grim. "Are you sure you want to do this, Hermione?"

"Absolutely," she replied without thinking. "How are we getting past the dog?" she asked, refusing to use the name 'Fluffy.'

"With a little help from Hagrid," Harry said, pulling the carved wooden flute from his robes. Then, he cast an Unlocking Charm on the door, and pushed it open. He raised the flute to his lips as he stepped into view. The sight that greeted him froze his blood.

Fluffy was fast asleep. Harry saw that Hermione hadn't been exaggerating when she described the Cerberus. The massive brown-furred dog indeed featured three enormous heads, each of which featured a massive mouth filled with large, sharp teeth. One of the heads let out a snort. There was a harp playing on the floor nearby, and the trapdoor had been flung wide open. The Dark Wizard they had been trying to stop had already beaten them.

"Damn," Harry cursed. "We've got to hurry." As he said this, Fluffy stirred. Harry hurriedly raised the flute to his lips and blew a series of basic notes. It wasn't a masterpiece, but it got the job done, and Hagrid's three-headed guard dog slept once more. Harry gestured for Hermione to come, and he jumped into the trap door, praying the drop wasn't that far. He landed on something soft and squishy.

"It's okay! Jump Hermione!" he called up to his friend. She did, but didn't land on a soft surface, instead hitting a rock ledge. "Ouch. Bad luck, Hermione."

"Bad luck? Look at yourself!" she cried. Harry looked down to see that the plant's tendrils had already encircled his legs, and were squeezing tightly. He tried to move, but it was too late. The plant's tendrils began to move up his body, encircling it. As it reached his stomach, he let out a cry for help. Hermione stood there, frozen.

Just as she had been with the troll.

“Hermione!” Harry cried. “What is this thing?”

Hermione was rocking back and forth, then stopped, “It’s Devil’s Snare!” she cried. “*Devil’s Snare...Devil’s Snare, it likes the dark and the glum...*”

“HERMIONE!” Harry cried again. Suddenly a tendril shot up and wrapped around Harry’s throat. His chest began to burn from a lack of oxygen as the plant strangled him. He tried to fire off a spell but his arm was held in place.

Hermione was almost jumping up and down as she tried to remember how to kill the plant. “*...but it wilts in the sun!* That’s it!..Now what? How do I create a *sun*?” Harry let out a strangled cry, and Hermione saw his face was turning red as the plant constricted his airway. “*Incendio!*” she cried. The Burning Hex hit the plant and set it on fire. It shrank away from the light, releasing Harry, who took a deep breath before he suddenly vanished from sight.

“*Harry!*” Hermione cried, peering off the edge. She heard a yell, and without thinking, jumped off her perch. She landed hard on a grassy patch in the middle of a chamber. Suddenly she was knocked off her feet and to the ground. She looked up to see that a Venomous Tentacula had just taken a bite out of the air where she had been standing. The dangerous plants were blood red with long tentacles and extendable ‘mouths’ that were lined with sharp teeth. These appeared to be the type that could rip a man’s head off.

Obviously, Sprout wasn’t concerned with keeping a potential thief alive.

Harry hauled her into the middle of a dirt circle, which appeared to be out of range of the Venomous Tentaculas that lined the walls. A cluster of them surrounded what appeared to be a trapdoor. Harry shot off a Blasting Hex, but the plant he destroyed was immediately replaced by another. He let out a cry of frustration. “Damn it!”

Hermione looked around and saw that they couldn’t move from the spot where they stood without being in danger of being eaten by the

deadly magical plants. Harry shot off a pair of Burning Hexes, which killed two that were getting too close. Hermione copied his move, trying to get the ones that were guarding the trapdoor. Then she saw something moving on the ground. They appeared to be vines of some sort, and were covered with red thorns. Harry shot a Blasting Hex at one, but it did nothing.

"Harry! We've got to move!" Hermione cried, shooting off another Burning Hex at the oncoming vines.

"I know! Burning Hexes at that cluster on three, put everything you've got into them! One...two...THREE! *INCENDIO!*"

Twin balls of fire shot into the formation and it began to burn. Harry fired a powerful Blasting Hex, momentarily knocking back the vines. "GO!"

The two eleven-year olds raced for the burning plants. Harry shot off another Burning Hex to reignite the fires.

"*Carpe Retractum!*" Harry yelled. A strand of light shot from his wand and yanked the trapdoor open.

Jumping over the burning Venomus Tentaculas, he shoved Hermione into the trapdoor. He was about to jump as well when he suddenly felt burning agony in his legs. The vines had caught up with him and were stabbing their thorns into his calves.

Fighting back the pain, Harry bellowed, "*REDUCTO!*" The Blasting Hex blew most of the vines to shreds, and allowed Harry to scramble into the trapdoor. He fell a few feet to the stone floor, and lay there, panting.

Hermione stifled a scream when she saw Harry's mangled legs. His robes were shredded and bloody, and the thorns had created shallow puncture wounds all over his lower legs. He tried to stand and nearly screamed from the pain.

"All you alright? Can you walk?" Hermione asked in a scared voice. Harry grimaced and nodded. He stretched out a hand, and Hermione pulled him to his feet. He immediately felt unsteady, and it felt like his

legs were on fire. He began slowly limping towards the next door, which Hermione unlocked.

They entered a large cavernous room with a high ceiling. On the other side of the room was a door that Hermione quickly determined was locked. Harry glanced up and saw what appeared to be hundreds of jeweled birds flying around the ceiling. That didn't make sense; this was no doubt Flitwick's contribution. That meant...

"They're not birds, Hermione. They're keys," Harry said, looking around. His eyes fell on a rack of brooms. "We've got to catch the right one."

"Well," she said, backing away towards the door, "you are catching the key. I'm staying on the ground." Harry nodded, and mounted one of the rickety old brooms. It slowly rose into the air, and Harry found himself in the middle of a swarm of keys, which flashed by far too quickly to be identified. He called down to Hermione for help.

"Hermione, can you tell me anything about the door? I reckon the key will be same type of metal and such."

"Well, it's kind of old and a dull silver color. It's a pretty big keyhole. Does that help any?" Hermione said hopefully.

Harry shook his head. "Not really, there's a bunch that match that description." He waved his arm, knocking away a key with a broken wing. He set off, then froze.

A key with a *broken wing*...

Harry scanned the cloud of keys, and spotted the key in question limping along at a pace much slower than the others. His fingers closed around it, and he shot for the ground, throwing the key to Hermione, who shoved it in the keyhole and turned it. Harry looked up and had his suspicions confirmed; the remaining keys were flying at high velocity straight at him like hundreds of knives. Several grazed him as he stumbled through the door. But before he slammed it, he heard Hermione scream in agony.

With the door closed, he stumbled over to his friend. One of the keys had stabbed into her left arm, which was bleeding profusely. With a look at Hermione, he yanked the key out and crushed it under his sneakers. He tore apart the sleeve of his robes and wrapped it around Hermione's arm as a combined bandage and tourniquet. He pulled Hermione to her feet, wincing as his injured legs made their presence felt.

The two injured students pushed the next door open, and found themselves in a large chamber containing a life-sized chess set. Two of the black pieces were missing, a queen and a knight. Taking their respective roles, they began to play.

For the first time in recent memory, Harry wished for the presence of Ron Weasley. The boy was an immature prat, but he could play chess with the best of them. Harry and Hermione were helpless, and were being slaughtered. As the white queen's sword smashed one of their rooks into pieces, Harry decided they had no choice.

"Hermione, we're not going to win this. Blasting Hexes on three. We're going to try and destroy the pieces. One..two..three! *REDUCTO!*" They charged.

Harry blew the head off of a pawn, then dodged dual sword strikes from two other pawns. He blasted one, and dodged a second blow from the other. The White queen moved forward, and Harry's Blasting Hex only succeeded in taking its arm off. Harry had lost track of Hermione, but her bellowed spells indicated she was still alive. A second Blasting Hex hit the queen's legs, but it failed to fell the white piece. Harry dove out of the way of the queen's sword strike, but it still cut into his shoulder. Hissing in pain, he finally destroyed the queen with a Blasting Hex to the torso. He spun around and saw that the black pieces had turned on them as well.

Harry blew apart two more black pawns, and Hermione let out a cry. A pair of Blasting Hexes took down the bishop that was sneaking up behind her. Harry dodged a mace from one of the knights before destroying the horse it was riding. He fought through more pieces as he blazed a path of destruction towards the white king. Finally, he blew a pawn to pieces with a curse, then sent the most powerful

Striking Curse that he could muster at the king's head. The blow decapitated the piece, and as the king's sword fell forward in a gesture of surrender, Harry heard Hermione scream.

He spun around and found her caught between a black knight and a pair of white pawns. When the pieces had frozen, the swords of the pawns were inches from her neck, and the mace had been about to come crashing down on her head. Her wand lay several feet away. Harry helped pull her out and embraced her as she shook violently in his arms. He whispered words of comfort as his tried to calm his hysterical best friend. A shudder went down his spine as he pondered what would have happened if he hadn't killed the king when he did. He was almost too late.

When Hermione had stopped shaking, they clambered over the wreckage of the chess pieces and got to the door. Harry yanked it open and was immediately assaulted by a foul stench that made his eyes water. Luckily, the troll was old cold, a bloody lump on its head. A good thing, because this troll was about twice as large as the one Harry had fought on Halloween. They opened the next door, which emptied into a room full of potions. As they cleared the entrance, purple fire sprang up, blocking their exit.

The two weary eleven-year olds made their way over to the table, on which nine bottles were arranged. A piece of paper was on the floor, but it was scorched badly by something.

Entire lines on the paper were blackened and unreadable. Hermione set to work trying to figure out the correct potions. After several guesses, she settled on a bottle near the middle, and handed it to Harry. "Are you sure, Hermione?"

She paused, then nodded. From the information she had, it was the correct bottle. She only wished she knew what the scorched paper said. Harry uncorked the bottle and took a sip. As he did so, Hermione suddenly realized she had made a mistake.

Harry dropped the bottle, staggering backwards. He collapsed to the floor, and his lips and extremities began to turn blue. Hermione screamed, and frantically looked around for something, anything to save her friend. She saw a small, grey stone lying on the table. One

of the questions that Snape had Silenced her for during their first classes.

She grabbed the bezoar, wretched Harry's jaw open and shoved it into his throat. The stone dissolved as it contacted the saliva, and Harry began to convulse. The convulsions lessened, and Harry's color returned. He lay panting, covered in sweat on the chamber floor. Hermione frantically pulled him into a bear hug. "Oh my god! I thought I lost you! Oh my god!" Harry tried to reassure her as best he could, but the poison had weakened him considerably.

"Hermione, we need to stop Voldemort (she shuddered). Find the right bottle." She set to work, and pulled a pair of bottles from the group, pulled the stoppers, and sniffed them. She then proceeded to hurl them to the back of the chamber.

"Nettle Wine," she explained. She pulled two more bottles. "Alright, these are them. This," she said, holding up the larger bottle, "will get us back through the purple fire. This," she said, holding up the smallest, "will get us past the black fire. There's just enough for the both of us."

"Hermione..."

"No, Harry. I'm not leaving you to face him alone," she said with determination. Harry sighed.

"Alright. I just don't want to lose you..."

"And I don't want to loose you either, Harry. I'm your best friend, and I'm going to fight alongside you..." Harry pulled her into a fierce embrace, which she returned. She felt tears prickling in her eyes, and broke away. "Well, we should go," she said quietly.

Each swallowed a drop of the potion. Harry felt a icy cold spreading through his body, and stepped into the black fire. He felt nothing and walked through the fire. The two walked into the antechamber, and suddenly the fire reignited, blocking their escape.

Standing in front of a large mirror was a black-cloaked figure. He turned to face the two, and Hermione sucked in a breath. It was Quirrell.

"Deal with the companion, my servant," a cold, snake-like voice spoke.

A/N: And now I leave you with a Cliffe. And while I know it isn't exactly "Kill the Spare," it means the same thing...or does it? You'll see.

For those of you waiting to see Harry show his Slytherin side, I've thrown in a little wrinkle in the last chapter that lets him be quite cunning and use some blackmail.

Harry is not submissive to anyone in this story but Daphne. What he is is far more intelligent and practical than canon Harry. Because while canon Harry would have hexed half the school already, this Harry realizes the only possible outcome of that is being expelled. Also, he's trying to give people a reason *not* to fear him. As for Hermione, he felt a pull of sort towards her, and really liked what he saw on the boats. He was so desperate that nothing could stop him. He was trying to make the best of a bad situation. As for his submissiveness to Daphne, it's actually a two-way street. Like I said earlier, both trust eachother implicitly, and that's a major character flaw.

For the last time, this fic is going to be H/G. What I do hope is the way I introduce Ginny and the way you get to know her for several years before she and Harry start dating, you might like her better than you think you will. I love Ginny's character, but I hate the way Rowling handles her, making her embarrass herself in the second book, vanishing off the face of the earth for the next two books, appearing only in time to be a somewhat strong character and get her ankle broken in the fifth book, then randomly become Harry's girlfriend in the 6th book. I don't know what Rowling is doing there. This Ginny will stand with Harry much earlier, giving Harry a reason to trust her almost as much as Hermione and Tonks. And Harry will get another male friend eventually, maybe two, and I'll give you a hint.

I've mentioned his name maybe twice, and he's the last person you'll expect. And no, it isn't Draco, who is, was, and always will be, the pureblooded heir of an ex-Death Eater. And it isn't Ron, either (I've mentioned his name quite a few times).

You *need* to understand this. Daphne wants Harry to have a *childhood*. I had her find out about the Prophecy for a reason. When Harry is old enough, she'll teach him everything she knows. But she will not turn him into a soldier at age eleven. It isn't fair to him. Understanding this is crucial to understanding Daphne's character.

Last Chapter

“Hermione...”

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“Alright. I just don’t want to lose you...”

“And I don’t want to loose you either, Harry. I’m your best friend, and I’m going to fight alongside you...” Harry pulled her into a fierce embrace, which she returned. She felt tears prickling in her eyes, and broke away. “Well, we should go,” she said quietly.

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Chapter 14: The Color of Blood

The voice froze Harry’s blood, and he found himself unable to move. Hermione’s eyes widened in fear. Quirrell began approaching, a malicious grin on his face. He raised his wand, pointed it at Hermione, and before Harry could bring up his own wand, he sent the eleven-year old girl crashing into a wall, knocking her out. She slid down to the ground, a trickle of blood flowing down the stones from her head wound.

Harry screamed in shock and outrage and ran over to his friend. He hadn’t gotten to within three feet of her when he was abruptly lifted off his feet and suspended in midair. His limbs and head were forced backwards, and he was paralyzed, straining against the spell. There was a burst of light from Harry’s wand, and suddenly the hold was

relinquished as he crumpled to the ground. His wand rolled away down the stairs, stopping at Quirrell's feet.

"Master, what is it?" Quirrell cried, seemingly to no one. He settled upon conjuring ropes and bound Harry to a pillar, where he looked on helplessly at his unconscious friend and traitorous teacher. Quirrell was pacing relentlessly in front of the mirror, cursing. Harry listened closely to what he was saying.

"...Blasted mirror! I see myself with the Stone, presenting it to my master! But how can I get it out of the Mirror! Shall I *break* it?" Quirrell cursed again, and shot off a random spell at the ceiling, which caused a small explosion and left a black scorch mark. "Master, aide me!"

"*Use the boy...use the boy...*" the same cold voice said.

Harry's blood froze again. Quirrell spun around and pointed his wand at Harry, vanishing the bonds. He again levitated Harry into the air and dumped him on the ground in front of the Mirror. Harry didn't know how, but he knew that he couldn't look at the Mirror. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Open your eyes, Potter! Look upon the Mirror!" Harry didn't open them. "Obey me! *Crucio!*"

Harry's body exploded into the most intense agony he had ever felt. His blood boiled, his scar was on fire, and his skin felt as if it had been stabbed by a thousand burning knives. His bones felt cold against the burning of his flesh. He thrashed around on the ground in agony, screaming at the top of his lungs. Quirrell held him under the curse for nearly thirty seconds before releasing him. Harry rolled over so that he wasn't facing the mirror.

"Look upon it, Potter! Now!" Quirrell yelled.

"Never, you bastard," Harry cried. He was picked up and slammed into a wall.

"*Crucio.*"

The chamber was again filled with Harry's screams as the Cruciatus Curse burned, flooding his nervous system with agony. He writhed on the floor until Quirrell lifted the spell. Coughs wracked his body, and Harry watched in horror as he vomited up blood.

"Ready to help yet, Potter?" Quirrell taunted. Harry rolled onto his stomach, and remained silent. He knew he had to hold on. It wasn't bravery, it was necessity. The odds were stacked against him. Surely Dumbledore had some way of knowing that the defenses of the Stone had been breached...

"Enough, servant...let me speak with him, face-to-face..." the snake-like voice hissed.

"Master, you are not strong enough – " AHH!"

"Do not doubt me, Quirrell. Turn around, and let me see the boy."

Slowly, Harry watched Quirrell turn around so that the back of his head was facing him. The man began to unwrap his turban. Harry's confusion turned to horror as a face was revealed jutting out of the back of Quirrell's head.

It was chalk white, with a flat nose and glowing red slits for eyes. His features were locked in an expression of malice. As he glared at Harry, his scar exploded in pain, and he collapsed back to the floor, hands clutching his forehead. Sticking out of the back of Quirrell's skull was none other than the murderer of his parents, Lord Voldemort.

Quirrell began walking slowly backwards, advancing on Harry, who was backpedaling with his arms and legs.

"Harry...Potter," Voldemort hissed, *"see what I have become...so weak that I must share the form of another..."*

Harry could only whimper in pain. The events of the past few hours were catching up to him, and the eleven-year old could only take so much.

Voldemort laughed. “*As a baby, you defeated me...somehow. Today, I stand before you and you cower in my presence. You beg for mercy just like your parents. How disgusting for a Slytherin...*”

“LIAR!” Harry screamed, finding strength he didn’t know he had. “My father died standing up to you! My mother tricked you into killing her first, so that I was protected!”

Voldemort gave what could best be described as a scowl. “*Indeed...but this time you have no mother to save you. No one to die for you...*”

Harry fought through the pain and managed to muster a glare at Voldemort.

“*You could join me, you know,*” Voldemort said. “*You are a powerful wizard, Harry.*”

“I’d never join you,” he spat angrily. “Not after what you did to my parents...to Daphne! I *despise* you!”

Voldemort laughed, and Harry’s scar burned. “*Such courage...and hatred in a young man...but there is a darkness within you, a burgeoning power. We could be great together, Harry...We could bring back your parents...We have the power...*”

Harry froze. For an instant, the possibility of seeing his parents again entered his mind. As it did so, he saw images of them standing in the fire behind Voldemort, beckoning to him. He felt his body begin to move as he was enraptured by his beautiful mother calling to him...

And then he broke away. Words spoken by Daphne long ago. “*No spell can resurrect the dead, Harry. Only the darkest of magic can reanimate bodies, but they are little more than puppets. I’m here for you, Harry, and I always will be...*

“NO!” Harry screamed. The images of his parents vanished. Voldemort’s fury overwhelmed him, and he dropped back to the ground, clutching at his forehead.

“Very well, Harry. CRUCIO!”

Voldemort's Cruciatus burned worse than Quirrell's. Harry writhed on the ground, feeling nothing but the burning agony. The fire continued to burn; he felt as if his skin was melting, his blood boiling. He wanted it to end.

He wanted to die.

Voldemort lifted his wand, laughing softly. "*Poor baby Potter.*" He raised his wand. "*Petrificus Totalis!*" Harry's arms and legs snapped together and he was paralyzed by the Full-Body Bind. He levitated Harry in front of the Mirror of Erised. Unable to close his eyes. Harry stared into the mirror.

He saw himself, covered in bruises, blood trailing from his nose and mouth, his robes torn to tatters and his legs coated in dried blood, standing up straight. A smile crossed his features, and he reached into his pocket. He pulled out a blood red stone, grinned, and put it back in his pocket. Suddenly, Harry felt the presence of something heavy enter his own pocket.

He had the Philosopher's Stone.

Released from the Body-Bind, Harry dove for his wand, and pulled it up, pulling his protesting body into a dueling stance. Voldemort laughed, and turned around so that Quirrell was facing forwards. The man let out a scream, and suddenly, his own face was replaced with that of Harry's enemy. Harry almost gagged from the sight. "*You believe you can defeat me, Potter?*"

Harry answered back with his own barking laugh, and something dark twinkled in his eyes. "I can only try. *REDUCTO!*"

Voldemort slapped away the Blasting Hex like it was nothing. "*Pitiful, Potter. Crucio!*"

Harry dodged the Cruciatus, and fired back a Disarming Charm, which Voldemort blocked with a wave of his wand. Then the Cruciatus hit him again. He crumpled to the ground, screaming in agony.

"I grow tired of this, Potter. Give me the Stone, and I will allow your companion to live."

Harry started despite the pain. He had forgotten Hermione's presence entirely. His mind began to race desperately. He couldn't lose her...but what would it matter if Voldemort got the Stone?

Voldemort strode over to the unconscious girl and levitated her lifeless body, aiming his wand. *"The Stone, Potter...Or she dies. I can tell you care much for this mudblood..."*

"Bastard," Harry hissed.

To his surprise, Voldemort chuckled. *"Indeed, I am, Potter. But this bastard child has grown to be more powerful than any wizard. People fear to speak my name, in fear that I will return..."*

"NO!" Harry screamed. *"I WON'T GIVE IT TO YOU!"*

Again, Voldemort laughed. *"I'm impressed, Potter. You are more Slytherin than I gave you credit for. You know I cannot touch you, that you are protected by your mudblood mother's sacrifice. You don't wish your friend harmed, but are intelligent enough to realize that I won't spare either of you if I am returned to body...Let's test that resolve."*

He leveled his wand at Hermione's stomach. *"Abrumpo!"* A scream died in Harry's throat as the Slicing Curse hit her in the chest at point blank range. Her stomach exploded in a shower of blood, and she was dumped to the floor as Voldemort turned away. The rise and fall of her chest revealed that she was still alive, but Harry knew enough about human biology to know that he had precious little time before she bled out. He tore his eyes away from the sight, and stood up on his injured legs.

"No."

"I have underestimated you, Potter," Voldemort admitted. *"Perhaps you are more heartless than I imagined. Not to say that I don't agree with you. After all, what use are mudbloods. All they do is die."*

Harry was shaking with rage, but couldn't choke out anything but a primal growl of fury.

"*But I grow tired of this game,*" Voldemort said. He waved his wand, and Harry was knocked hard to the ground. He leveled his wand at Harry. "*The Stone, Potter, or poor Daphne will have to bury yet another of her loved ones.*"

"Go to hell, Voldemort," Harry spat.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" Voldemort cried. Try as he may, Harry couldn't keep his eyes closed, and watched as the jet of green light exploded from the end of his nemesis's wand. Speeding death rushed towards him, and a rushing sound filled his ears. He watched as the green light connected with his chest, and his last thought...

I failed you, Daphne...

The next thing Harry saw was blinding red light that exploded from his pocket, enveloping both Harry and Voldemort. The green jet vanished, and Voldemort's eyes lit up in confusion. The red aura began to grow brighter. Voldemort's eyes narrowed, and he raised his wand for a second time.

And then the world exploded.

The red aura was transformed in a flash to a blinding white. It enveloped Harry and Voldemort, and all they could see through it was each other.

Harry suddenly felt a sensation the like of which he had never felt before. He felt safety and serenity. His body was at peace, his wounds burned no more. He was content and loved. An affectionate voice whispered in his ear:

I love you Harry.

His body felt as if it was being cradled in the arms of a mother. Every sadness, every negative emotion was swept away. Memories, good

memories, began to play in front of him. Memories he had never recalled before.

A black haired man picked him up in his arms and tossed him up in the air, while a red headed woman laughed in the background.

His stared up at a mobile that featured broomsticks, a snitch, a quaffle, and a Gryffindor Lion. A face entered the picture, that of a beautiful woman with flowing dark red hair and vibrant green eyes full of caring and compassion. She pulled him up out of the cradle, and caressed his black hair. She looked as though she was about to burst with pride and happiness; her expression was that of pure bliss. Harry felt waves of protectiveness bursting from her, and relaxed in their warmth and comfort.

A black haired man with proud hazel eyes hidden by wire-frame glasses entered his sight. He gazed upon mother and child with unbridled love and affection. He reached out and ruffled his small son's tuft of black hair, before his hand was playfully slapped away by his wife. He bent and kissed her on the lips, before reaching out for his son. His wife placed Harry in his arms, and he glanced furtively at her before ruffling his hair again. He laughed, then took off his glasses, and placed them on his son. He burst out laughing at what he saw. Two more people entered the room. A tall man with bright features and lanky black hair that fell into his glittering blue eyes. He burst out laughing at the sight of the bespectacled baby, pushing the woman standing beside him, a woman with honey-blond hair and loving grey-green eyes that Harry knew very well, into Harry's line of sight. She too burst out laughing, holding on to the other man for support. She stopped and pulled her red-headed friend into a tender embrace, then took the baby from his father. She clutched him to her chest, caressing his back. The baby gurgled in pleasure.

The scene began to fade...

The chamber came back into focus, and with it, the pain of his injuries. The chamber, with the Mirror of Erised standing in the center, Hermione Granger unconscious and bleeding profusely against a

pillar off the right, and in front of the fire blocking the entrance, a bruised, battered eleven-year old boy and a Professor possessed by the most feared Dark Lord since Gridenwald.

At the moment, however, the Dark Lord was undergoing an ordeal that was the exact opposite of his enemy. The love and affection that Harry had been surrounded in was as painful to experience as the worst Cruciatus. The pure light seared into the dark soul of Quirrell, who screamed at the top of his lungs, his horrifying shrieks those of a man whose body was being incinerated. Harry saw a flash of Dark shadow, and then the man was obliterated as his body exploded in a burst of white light.

The last sight that Harry saw was his dying friend bleeding against a pillar....

Severus Snape, cursing in every language he knew, dashed into the chamber containing Hagrid's mutt. His Dark Mark burned, and the presence of a harp, along with the fact that the trap door was flung wide open, told him all he needed to know. A spell restarted the harp, and Fluffy was sent into dreamland for the third time that night.

He had been a fool to trust Albus's judgment. And now Quirrell had beaten him to the Stone. The Dark Lord would kill him for his treachery, if it was indeed too late. Snape hated the man that the Dark Lord had become. He followed Albus Dumbledore because the man had given him another chance at life.

He fired an Incineration Curse into the darkness below him, and the air was filled with the screams of the Devil's Snare, the Venomous Tentacles, and the Thorned Stranglevines. He extinguished the blaze, and jumped into the next trapdoor. He entered the key room, and found the correct key jammed into the hole. He cast an Freezing Charm on the other keys and pushed the door open.

He found one of the brooms on the other side, then stepped up to McGonagall's chess set. He found it in ruins, the chamber covered in scorch marks, and most of the pieces shattered into fragments. The white king was headless and disarmed. Obviously, the thief had not been very good at chess, and decided simply to blast the

Transfigured pieces. Still, the number of scorch marks raised questions. Had Quirrell had an accomplice?

He ran into the next room, ready to decapitate the troll, but found it unconscious. He wrinkled his nose in disgust, and cast the Severing Curse anyway. He proceeded into his own contribution, and found that Quirrell had either been impatient or wasn't very good at logic. The Nettle Wine bottles were smashed on the far side of the chamber, and only four bottles remained on the table. Two of the poisons, the Return potion, and an empty Forward potion. He looked in surprise at the shattered poison bottle. Repairing the bottle and replacing the contents, he found that it had been drunk. That confirmed that Quirrell did indeed have an accomplice, as he would not have been able to get the bezoars that had been placed on the table just in case. Personally, Snape found that particular measure to be counter-productive. Why keep the thief alive?

He terminated the Black Fire incantation, which he could do because he cast it in the first place. Stepping through the antechamber, he walked into the chamber housing the Philosopher's Stone. The sight that met him was shocking to say the least. Rather than Quirrell and an accomplice, he saw two eleven-year olds. Both unconscious.

Potter was a frightful sight, but Granger was bleeding profusely from a serious stomach wound. Severus waved his wand and sealed the injury, stopping the bleeding temporarily. He stepped in front of the Mirror of Erised, praying that he would see himself doing *something* involving the Philosopher's Stone. He knew that he was too Dark to obtain the Stone himself, but if the Stone appeared in his most heartfelt desire, that meant it remained in the mirror.

To his horror, he simply saw what he had seen the first time he gazed into the mirror of Erised. An image that depicted something that was both impossible to achieve and featured the two things Severus pined for above all others.

He spun around furiously. The Dark Lord had taken the Stone, there was no other explanation.

He had failed.

"Then why did he leave two children alive, Severus," a voice called from behind him. Severus spun around to see Albus Dumbledore standing in the doorway, his eyes twinkling. "You have not failed. Harry has prevented Tom from talking the Stone."

"What are you talking about?" Severus demanded. What game was this old man playing?

"Harry obtained the Stone from the Mirror, that much I know. However, I do not know how he managed to cause the death of our late Defense teacher, nor delay the return of Voldemort once more."

"Are you to tell me that this...boy prevented the Dark Lord from taking the Stone? Then where it is, old man?"

"The Stone has been destroyed. Harry showed great bravery tonight, but I believe his survival was pure chance. We must take them to the Hospital Wing. If you would get Miss Granger, Severus."

"No, Albus. I will take my own." He raised his wand, and conjured a stretcher, before levitating the injured Slytherin onto it.

"A show of caring for the boy, perhaps, Severus?" Albus asked, his blue eyes twinkling madly.

"A responsibility to those wearing the green and silver, *Albus*," he retorted, spitting the old wizard's name as if it was a vile curse." Changing the subject, he sneered. "Do you remember what I said to you on Halloween?" he asked as they walked at a brisk pace through the deactivated defenses.

"Ah, yes. Something about "not cleaning up your mess when it exploded in your face," it seems you were correct, my old friend. Nonetheless, there is no harm done."

"No *harm* done? Albus for Merlin's sake, think about what *Dressler* is going to do!"

Dumbledore winced. "I must admit that had slipped my mind. Let us make haste, these two need attention."

A/N: What do you think? I know everyone is going to want to ask about how Harry survived the Killing Curse the second time. Dumbledore will offer an explanation next chapter.

Coming up: Daphne comes to Hogwarts. I know you've been waiting for this. (She is NOT going to hex everyone in sight, sorry if that's what you were hoping.)

On another note, I'm shocked that no one has brought up Tonks's description of Daphne's moniker and past. Because it's damn important to the plot, and the character. She holds *nothing* back when it comes to actual fighting. Hunting down specific Death Eaters, torturing them ('hurting' them was a euphemism for the Cruciatus Curse), and murdering two, one by blowing his head into small fragments (Evan Rosier), and another with the Killing Curse (suffice to say the third death wasn't clean either), isn't normal behavior for an Auror. She's got a great deal of Darkness within her, even if she's loyal to the light. She's no McGonagall, folks.

As for Hermione and the Dark Arts, she despises injustice in any form. Hermione may be Muggleborn, but in that way, she actually has more of a grounding in morality than most wizards do. She's idealistic in canon, and while she will change a bit in my AU, she's still has a respect for the rules and doesn't have the same hatred that lurks inside Harry. Hermione doesn't hate Voldemort, she stands against him because he is malevolent, threatens her friends, and wants something she is morally opposed to. Yes, she's studious, and could learn the Dark Arts if she wanted to. But it's an issue of wanting to.

I think a number of people are treating this as far too black and white and while they accuse me of being ridiculous, are expecting Daphne, a character who is level-headed most of the time, to ride around with Snape's head on a stick. It doesn't work that way. Because in the real world, eleven year olds don't have the power or position to threaten grown adults, no matter how unjust they are. They are still children, mature children, yes, but children none the less. And Daphne may be an ex-Auror, but she's still governed by the laws. Keep that in mind.

As for Ginny and the Chamber: It's all the more frightening that she can't remember. Think about it. She was attacking people with a serpent that can kill with its eyesight. She's an innocent, naive young girl, and suddenly she had that hurled onto her shoulders. She still has to deal with the knowledge that she almost murdered five people. And that she had absolutely no control over that. That isn't a comforting fact, it's a frightening one. Seriously, how could she not be scarred by the Chamber? She had her innocence stripped away from her at age eleven. Eleven-year old children are not supposed to deal with the guilt of narrowly avoiding being a murderer, possession or not. She's not rational enough at that age to realize that it isn't her fault.

I have no idea how anyone can come to the conclusion that Harry was unprepared for First Year. Daphne didn't exactly expect anyone to be trying to kill him. She's not Mad-Eye Moody folks. As for the Prophecy, you are absolutely right. And I'm doing it intentionally. This is an example of Daphne's drive to keep Harry safe, but also happy, being detrimental to her adopted son. She doesn't want to throw the weight of the world on his shoulders for no reason. But honestly, Daphne isn't omniscient. Is she supposed to anticipate that Harry will be fighting for his life each year? That's called the Mad-Eye approach to life, and Daphne may be scarred, but she's not quite there yet. If she tells Harry the Prophecy, it will be for a good reason. Of course, I'm not promising Daphne will survive that long...

Harry is *not* easily manipulated. While he submits to the harassment and such, he doesn't let it affect his own self-image. Not once does he think what Snape is saying is true, and he *certainly* doesn't buy anything of the garbage Ron is spewing. Becoming friends with Hermione does wonders for his confidence. There's another difference between canon Harry and GM Harry. Remember, he deliberately disobeyed McGonagall to keep visiting the mirror of Erised. He hasn't had much interaction with Dumbledore yet, but he'll behave quite differently when he does. Harry is not trying to prove his worth, and isn't scared to make his opinions felt, *if the situation is appropriate*. Harry is ambitious; he wants to become a Great Wizard, really, he wants to be like Daphne.

Chapter 15: Reunions, Revelations, and Returning Home

There were very few things in the world that Albus Dumbledore was afraid of.

An angry Daphne Dressler was one of them.

Currently, the aforementioned Auror was standing in Albus's office, her arms crossed across her chest, her posture straight and upright. She was also fixing him with a vicious glare.

"I'm waiting, Albus. I'm waiting to find out why you let this happen. I'm waiting to find out why you have allowed my son to be ostracized, harassed by his fellow students and a certain potions master, and verbally and mentally abused by the aforementioned potions master. I know the laws, Albus. And I know that using Legillimacy on students is borderline at best, illegal at worst. He was invading my son's privacy, and Thank Merlin that Harry actually included that he was getting headaches around that mind rapist, or I never would have known." She said this slowly, with a deadly calm that terrified all but the bravest. And even for them, it made them uneasy. The fire blazing in Daphne's eyes was frightening in and of itself.

"I must apologize Daphne, for I erred greatly. I should not have allowed it to get to this level, but I don't want to be viewed as playing favorites—"

"Albus, if it weren't for the prophecy, Harry would have been transferred into the Magical Academy of Ottawa with his friends. But just because he stands for it doesn't mean I will. Harry hasn't said it out loud, because he didn't want me to do just this. As for Severus, you might be inclined to speak with the little Death Eater. As is, I'm starting to think about teaching Harry Occlumency."

"Daphne, please. You know that he is too young. His mind is not developed enough." She sighed, defeated on that point, but didn't relent.

"Albus, give me a reason *outside* the Prophecy that I should allow Harry to return to Hogwarts. And once you've done that, explain why exactly despite my best efforts, a pair of eleven year olds were able

to access the Philosopher's Stone, and nearly die because of it. Hermione would have bled out, and Harry's magical core is dangerously depleted. I don't even want to know what happened there."

"I made a grave error, Daphne. One that I will do my utmost to correct. The Wizarding World makes the mistake of painting me as infallible. I assure you I am not."

"No, you aren't. At least you can admit that much. I don't want to do this, Albus. But I love Harry to death, and I won't let him be abused like this. I never could have imagined this. And don't think I've forgotten about the Mirror. What in Merlin's name were you *thinking*, putting that where a student could access it? Especially a student dealing with as much as Harry?"

When Daphne had arrived on the Hogwarts Grounds, she had been sought out by an almost inconsolable Minerva McGonagall. The resulting conversation had been both enlightening and alarming in what it revealed. Harry had been hiding quite a bit from her. She wasn't sure if she wanted to confront him or not.

"Don't let it happen again, Albus," she warned. "And I want you to have a *long* discussion with Severus Snape. I'll challenge the bastard to a duel if I have to, and you know there won't be much left of him."

"Severus is a talented duelist, but alas, I fear he would be no match for you. The only two, besides myself and Lord Voldemort that can are in Azkaban."

"I'm going to see my son now, Albus. I expect you to act on what you have learned. And to not be as complacent next time. We cannot take that risk. The Prophecy doesn't make Harry immortal, indeed, I take it to mean that 'by the hand' can mean servants, creatures, anything that answers to Lord Voldemort."

"I agree with you, Daphne. That is why you cannot remove Harry from Hogwarts. It isn't the safest environment, but nonetheless, he can only learn what he needs to learn here. He has dealt with much, and emerged better from it."

"Perhaps," she said coldly, "but if I hear that Snape doesn't improve next year, I will *not* hesitate to come up here and deal with him. I've already considered moving into Dressler Manor, simply to be closer to him."

"I know that, Daphne. And I understand. Severus was out of line."

"To say the least. Fine. I've said my say. We will *not* mention this in front of Harry, he's got enough to deal with right now."

"Agreed. I am sorry, Daphne," he said softly. Daphne didn't need to use Legillimacy to tell he really meant it.

"I'm sorry too, Albus," she said over her shoulder.

When Harry awoke, the world was fuzzy. He quickly realized he wasn't wearing his glasses. He reached for them, feeling unusually weak. He felt the glasses being placed onto his face, and looked up to see the tear-streaked face of Daphne staring down at him. Harry reached out his arms, but couldn't move them.

"Hello, Harry," Daphne said quietly.

"Daph..."

"Shhh. It's alright, Harry, I'm here now. I'm so glad you're alright," she said softly, tears streaking down her face. She ran a hand through his hair and bent down to kiss his forehead. Her eyes were filled with pride and relief.

"Hermione...?" Harry asked desperately. The last sight he remembered was of his best friend bleeding on the chamber floor.

Daphne gestured to his right, and Harry saw his best friend sleeping silently in her own bed. His face broke into a smile at the sight. "She's fine, Harry. I've actually talked to her a few times already. This is the first time you've woken up."

"How long has it been?" Harry asked.

"Four days. I nearly had a heart attack when Dumbledore contacted me, and I demanded to come here immediately."

Harry felt his exhaustion creeping up on him. "Daphne..."

She placed a finger to her lips. "Shhh. You're tired, Harry. Get some rest; I'll stay here as long as I have to."

Harry smiled weakly and closed his eyes, falling back into the darkness.

Harry opened bleary eyes and blinked. The world was fuzzy again. Groping around for his glasses, he found this on the bedside table and put them on. He tried to sit up but found he didn't have the energy. He turned his head to Hermione's bed, and saw her sitting up reading their Transfiguration textbook, an inkwell on the nightstand, a quill in her hands, and a piece of parchment over one side of the book. Harry chuckled weakly.

"Do you ever stop studying?"

Hermione jumped, and then squealed, "*Harry!* You're awake!"

"Go to see you to, 'Mione. How long have you been up?" Harry asked tiredly.

"About four hours. And Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't call me 'Mione. I'm really not that fond of that nickname. Don't ask why, it's just annoying," she said matter-of-factly. Harry shrugged.

"Whatever you say...Has Dumbledore been around yet? And where's Daphne?" Harry asked, surprised that his aunt wasn't around.

As Hermione opened her mouth to speak, the sound of loud arguing came from outside the closed Hospital Wing doors. It sounded like Daphne and Snape.

“...I don’t care if he stopped the Dark Lord or not! He deserves to be expelled!”

“...Don’t give me that, Snape,” Daphne snapped. “You owe him more than anyone. Or have you forgotten about your previous *occupation*.”

“Don’t you dare-“

“SILENCE!” Dumbledore cried. “Enough, both of you. Severus, I will *not* expel Harry or Hermione, and that is final. They have suffered more than enough for their rule breaking...”

The sounds of the argument grew fainter as the participants walked away. Harry tried to sit up, and managed to at least lean back against his pillows. The doors of the Hospital Wing opened, admitting a subdued-looking Minerva McGonagall. Hermione sat up straighter.

“Professor?” she asked.

“Hello Miss Granger, Mister Potter. How are you two feeling?”

“Very tired,” Harry responded, “and still pretty sore...” he trailed off as he was assaulted by the images of his ordeal. He shivered at the memory of the Cruciatus.

“Are you all right, Mister Potter?” McGonagall asked, concerned.

“Just...remembering,” he said quietly. Hermione made a motion to get out of bed, but found herself unable to, and settled for giving him a sympathetic look.

“I understand. I’m here because I’d like to apologize to you two. I should have taken your concerns seriously. I simply found the entire scenario so absurd...”

“It’s alright, Professor,” Hermione interrupted her. “Believe me; I’m not sure I would have behaved any differently.”

“Be that as it may, Miss Granger, the two of you were nearly killed because I was too complacent. I believed that the defenses surrounding the Stone were impenetrable. The very fact that a pair of

first years, no matter how accomplished you two may be, were able to break through them, proves that my faith was misplaced.”

Harry and Hermione really didn’t have an answer for that. “Well, we forgive you, Professor,” Harry said lamely.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. But I must say I cannot understand what possessed you two to take such risks. Nonetheless, you two have done a great service to the wizarding world and to this school. Professor Dumbledore has informed me that he would like to get a full account of what happened from you two. He’ll be back within the hour, if that’s alright with you.”

“It’s fine, Professor,” Harry said. “Can you get Daphne to be there?”

“Of course, Mr. Potter. Good day.”

No sooner had McGonagall left than the noise started up again. This time, Severus Snape burst through the doors. He was livid.
“POTTER! WHAT IN MERLIN’S NAME DO YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING? HAS YOUR HEAD SWELLED SO MUCH THAT YOU BELIEVE YOURSELF CAPABLE OF FIGHTING THE DARK LORD? DO YOU REALIZE YOU ARE ALIVE BECAUSE OF SHEER CHANCE? YOU ARE A GLORY-SEEKING, ARROGANT-“

“STUFF IT, SNIVELLUS!” Daphne yelled, crashing through the doors behind him. “You are *alive* because Harry and Hermione were brave enough to oppose him. Had they not intervened, risking their lives in the process, you would have been Voldemort’s first victim. And you know what he does to traitors! Personally, I would have just let him kill you, you damned mind raper.”

“You dare to assume that I-“

“SILENCE! BOTH OF YOU!” Dumbledore bellowed.

“I concur!” Madam Pomfrey yelled. “GET OUT! BOTH OF YOU! MY PATIENTS NEED REST, NOT A SHOUTING MATCH!”

Snape stormed out of the room, Daphne hot on his heels. Dumbledore sighed and gave them a look saying clearly, 'I'll be back later.'

Daphne sat on the chair at Harry's beside, holding her adoptive son's hand. She ran a hand through her hair and crossed her legs, before glancing supportively at Harry. Hermione's bed was now right beside his, so that they could offer support to each other.

Standing in front of both of them was Albus Dumbledore, his expression grave and his bright blue eyes filled with sadness. "Perhaps it would be best if you began from the beginning, Harry."

And so Harry and Hermione began their narrative of solving the mystery of the Philosopher's Stone. They began with Harry's visit to Gringotts, and Hagrid's suspicious package. He detailed their discussions with Hagrid, and his revelation about Flamel. Harry discussed his research at Dressler Manor, and the discovery that the object in question was the Philosopher's Stone.

Next, they discussed their realization that one of their Professors was after the Stone. They discussed their thoughts about the coincidences on Halloween of the troll and Snape's injury, and finally the conversation that Harry had overhead on his broom after the Quidditch match. Next, Harry detailed his scar pains and feelings that something was going to happen soon.

Next, they began their account of breaking through the Stone's defenses. They discussed using Hagrid's flute to put Fluffy to sleep, and stopping the Devil's Snare. They talked about their desperate charge to the trapdoor against the Venomous Tentaculas, and Harry's injuries from the thorned vines. Daphne was alarmed by the latest revelation, but Dumbledore assured her that Harry's wounds were healed. Next, they discussed the key room and Hermione's shoulder injury. Dumbledore was impressed by Harry's flying ability.

They detailed their useless attempts to beat the chess set, and their pitched battle against the Transfigured Chessmen. Hermione was shivering as she recalled her near-death. Daphne was scared for her

adoptive son, but proud of his ability. Dumbledore also conveyed his admiration of their efforts.

When they talked about Harry's accidental poisoning, Daphne grabbed Harry's hand with alarm while giving a horrified glance at Hermione. The girl went quiet and began sobbing. Daphne, feeling guilty for upsetting her, went over and gave the girl a firm hug. Sniffling, she resumed her narrative, and Daphne complimented her on her ability to figure out such a difficult riddle without the complete text.

Harry took over from there. Hermione was horrified with Harry's description of her being hurled into the wall. In a dead-sounding voice, he detailed his confrontation with Quirrell. When he mentioned being tortured with the Cruciatus Curse, Daphne started with alarm.

"*WHAT?*" she cried. "Oh Merlin, Harry. I can't believe this!"

"I—"

"Don't, Harry. It's over and done with. You have no idea how awful I feel about you having to go through that at such a young age." Harry was speechless, and for a moment, Hermione's soft sobs were all that broke the silence.

After Harry had recovered his composure he discussed the rest. Daphne was clinging to him like a lifeline as he described his battle with Voldemort. Dumbledore looked shocked to discover that he had failed to detect his nemesis operating in Hogwarts. When Harry talked about how he got the Stone, the old man allowed himself a small smile, then gestured for Harry to continue.

Harry completely froze up when he tried to describe what Voldemort did to Hermione. When he finally choked it out, Hermione burst into tears and Daphne reassured him the best she could. But if that was difficult, it was nothing compared to describing what happened next.

When Harry said that Voldemort had used the Killing Curse on him, Hermione screamed, Daphne swore and started crying, and Dumbledore looked grim, though there was a flash of recognition in his eyes. Harry fought through his tears as he described the scenes

he saw after the green light hit the Stone. He finally stopped, and as best as he could, lunged into Daphne's arms. She held him firmly and tenderly as he cried.

Wiping tears from his eyes, he turned to Dumbledore. "Sir, I have a question."

"Yes, Harry?"

"Why does Voldemort want to kill me? Why did he go after me in the first place? What's so special about Harry Potter?"

The result of asking this question was remarkable. Daphne froze, her face a mask of anguish, while Dumbledore sighed sadly. "Alas, Harry, the first question you ask me is the one I cannot answer." He gave a meaningful look at Daphne, who nodded, and ran a hand through Harry's hair.

"Daphne...?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I can't. You'll find out when you are older. Forget about it for now, thanks to your efforts, it won't be important for a while." Harry nodded.

"Alright," he said quietly.

"I'll leave you now," Dumbledore said, clearing his throat. And he left the three. He needed to make a Floo call to a *very* old friend regarding his most valuable possession.

Harry, Hermione, and Daphne had one more conversation with Dumbledore before the two were finally released from the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. Dumbledore told them about how Nicholas had taken the news of the destruction of the Stone quite well, and how he and Pernelle had been considering ending their very long lives for quite some time. It seemed to put the eleven year olds at ease. Dumbledore also described what had happened in the Chamber. He and Daphne explained that Lily's sacrifice had given him protection against the Darkest of wizards in his very blood, and that Harry's own considerable power was magnified.

In the Forest, Voldemort had been present in the form of his half-life, fully possessing the body of Quirrell. The pure evil of the man had meant that it had activated Lily's blood protection, and used Harry's natural power to repulse the Dark Lord. In the chamber, the Killing Curse had struck the Philosopher's Stone dead on, and the immensely powerful magical object had magnified the blood magic to monstrous levels. The pure White magic had provided comfort and protection for Harry and Hermione, while it eradicated the pure Dark magic in the body of Quirrell, forcing Voldemort's spirit to flee. The Dark Lord was no doubt back in hiding, far too weak to be of any threat for quite some time.

The return to school life was something that neither eleven-year old was ready for. While the Gryffindors were likely to treat Hermione as a hero, Harry had no idea what his reception would be like back with the Slytherins. Daphne had offered to stay, but Harry had sent her home, saying he needed to get through it on his own. The day they returned was the night of the Leaving Feast. Harry and Hermione entered at dinner side by side, and the Great Hall immediately quieted. Hermione still had a bandage across her stomach that showed through her robes. Due to the delay in treating the major injury, it was going to leave a wicked scar.

As they stepped over the threshold, Terry Boot, Lisa Turpin, and Mandy Brocklehurst rose to their feet and began applauding. Slowly, but steadily, more and more students rose to their feet. Even the Weasleys applauded raucously. With one final glance, Harry and Hermione broke apart and approached their respective tables. Harry watched as Hermione walked into the throng of Gryffindors, who patted her on the back and congratulated her. She turned back to look at Harry, beaming happily. She sat down next to the other Gryffindor First Years who began grilling her about her experiences.

Harry approached the Slytherins slowly and confidently, showing no fear of rejection in his expression. Most of the Slytherins were politely applauding, though a few harder than others. This included Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Pansy Parkinson, and Millicent Bulstrode. Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle sat there glaring angrily at him. Harry sat down next to Theodore.

"You know, I said it once, I'll say it again. You really do know how to make an impression, Potter."

"Thanks Nott...I guess."

"Well, it seems you've accomplished quite a bit this year, Potter," Greengrass said. "I hope you don't intend to lose quite so many House points next year." Harry flinched.

"I don't intend to," he said weakly. Daphne gave him a strange smile, before turning to face the front of the Great Hall. Currently, the celebration had already begun at the Ravenclaw table, which had a sizable lead over the others in House points. Harry wasn't sure if people were going to forget losing 120 points, no matter what he did.

Dumbledore stood up, and waved his hand. The Great Hall quieted, so quickly that Harry briefly wondered if Dumbledore's presence was somehow magically enhanced. "Ah, another year is at an end. Where does time go?" he asked rhetorically. "I believe that the House Cup needs awarding. As the points now stand, Hufflepuff is in 4th place with 352 points, Slytherin is in third place with 375 points, Gryffindor is in 2nd place with 385 points, and finally, Ravenclaw is in 1st place with 438 points." Dumbledore's last few words were lost in the explosion of cheering from the blue and bronze tables. Professor Flitwick appeared to be floating on air.

"Yes, yes, well done Ravenclaw! However, due to recent events, there are some last minute points to be handed out." The Great Hall quieted, and the Ravenclaws stared intently at their Headmaster, some with expressions of confusion, others with expressions of betrayal.

"First, to Miss Hermione Granger of Gryffindor. For cool logic in the face of fire, superb spellwork, and outstanding bravery, I award Gryffindor 60 points!"

The Ravenclaws stared in disbelief, while the Gryffindor table exploded. Hermione was nearly trampled by the horde of raucous students. Harry sat up expectantly. If he was right, they wouldn't be celebrating for much longer. The Hall quieted as Dumbledore remained standing.

"Second, to Mister Harry Potter. For extrodinary leadership ability, outstanding knowledge and use of advanced magic, remarkable bravery, excellent cunning, and finally, exceptional loyalty to his friends and to this school, I award Slytherin 70 points!"

The reaction to this was interesting. Most of the students immediately added the point totals up in their heads, and realized that they were tied. The Gryffindors and Slytherins glared at each other, as if shocked by the gall of the other House to dare be tied with them. Unfortunately for those in green and silver, Dumbledore wasn't done.

"To Mister Ronald Weasley (Harry felt the sudden urge to deprive said red-head of his ability to pass on his genes). As much courage as it take to stand up to your enemies, it takes just as much to stand up to your friends (*Since when are Ron and Hermione friends?*). I award Gryffindor 10 points."

The scarlet and gold table cheered so loudly that Harry sworn a bomb had gone off. Inside, he was seething. Weasley had *not* been bravely standing up to his friend, he had been stupidly and pettily interfering based not on a desire to prevent Gryffindor from losing points, but to get Harry, a Slytherin, into trouble. Weasley was accepting wild congratulations from his Housemates, while the Slytherins shot him death-glares. Harry looked up and Dumbledore and put all of the anger and frustration of the year into a withering glare at the Headmaster. The old man seemed to flinch for a moment, giving Harry a small satisfaction. Harry turned his attention back to the Gryffindor table and the urge to hex Weasley returned. Hermione, unlike the rest of her Housemates, was sitting on the table, staring straight ahead. Weasley was standing over her shoulder, yelling at her.

He apparently said too much, because Hermione turned red, and slapped Ron hard across the face before she got up and stormed from the room. Harry was right behind her.

He finally found her on the entrance to the school. She was sitting on the stairs, crying. Harry came up behind her, and sat down next to her. "What in Merlin's name does Dumbledore think he's doing?" Harry asked.

“The...*bloody prat* said...he said...” Hermione sniffled. “...he said that I should be *happy* for him, and that it...it was too *bad* I had to bring you back with me.”

Harry had had enough. “*REDUCTO!*” a massive burst of white light shot from the end of his wand and connected with a hill, sending a massive plume of soil into the air with a loud BANG.

“*That...bloody...bastard...*” Harry ground out, his wand still extended, the arm holding it shaking.

“I...he thinks that he should have stopped me. He says I should be thankful to him that he didn’t report me for Stunning him.” Harry wrapped an arm around his best friend’s shoulders.

“Let him bask in his idiocy, Hermione. If he’s going to be that way, he doesn’t deserve to know the truth. Let him figure it out on his own. The students whose opinions are worth caring about will realize when they hear it how undeserved it was.”

“You’re right, Harry...you’re always right that way...”

“Bollocks, Hermione. We’ve both made mistakes. But I don’t need to put Weasley down to know that I’m better than him, and it’s got nothing to do with wealth or status. I don’t want his respect, because it isn’t worth anything.”

“You know,” she said, sniffling and wiping her eyes, “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Neither do I,” Harry admitted. “You know, one thing I think I might try to do next year is get to know some of my own Housemates. Why don’t you give it a try, too?”

“I suppose. Ronald’s going to be insufferable next year.”

“Who cares? Let him be as pompous as he wants. When push comes to shove, let’s see him earn it next time.”

After another minute, Harry and Hermione walked back into the Great Hall. A few heads turned their way, and Ron was purple-faced with

fury. Harry grinned evilly at him and patted his wrist holster. The change in the boy's color was remarkable. Harry decided to take Hermione over to the Slytherin table. A few of his Housemates gave him a questioning look, but probably figured that Hermione had been wronged as much as they had.

To Harry surprise, Draco Malfoy tapped him on the shoulder, with an apologetic look on his face. "Potter," he addressed him, "I must admit I was much mistaken in my analysis of you, and *Granger*," he ground out, obviously fighting the urge to say 'the mudblood.' "I doubt you care to be my friend, but I'd like to at least apologize for some of my behavior this year that didn't befit my status."

Harry nodded. "Very well. I'm not Weasley, Malfoy. I'm not going to judge you based on your heritage. I made that mistake earlier. I'm willing to at least be civil with you." He extended his hand, and Harry shook it, maintaining eye contact the entire time.

When Draco left, Nott gave him an appraising look, and Hermione tapped him on the shoulder. "What was that about?"

"It means that for now, I've got one less enemy inside my own House. His father may have been a Death Eater, but Draco's at the stage where he isn't capable of independent thought. He may yet take a different direction. Besides, seeing as Lucius Malfoy abandoned his master, I'm guessing that he's somewhat grateful to me. Like I said before, whynot possibly eliminate anadversary? I don't have to like him.I mean, I wouldn't be shocked if he forgot we ever had this discussion. Actually, I'd be surprised did remember it. Either way, Malfoy's got power and influence. I hate the git, but you can't just cast them aside. I've just got to be wary. Never trust a Slytherin farther than you can throw him"

"That includes you, right?" Hermione asked smartly.

"Shut up."

Harry got a small measure of amusement when word came down the next day that the Weasley twins had been caught smuggling firewhiskey into the dorms for a victory celebration. Hermione had

apparently taken Harry's later advice and went straight to her room, closed the curtains, cast a few Silencing Charm, and opened a good book. Lavender Brown, one of her roommates, had been quite amused by Ron yelling at her to come out when she couldn't actually hear him.

At the present time, Harry was waiting in the shadows in the corridor leading the Great Hall, waiting to pass a certain message. Ron Weasley came strutting through, his crowd of admirers well behind him. Without warning, Harry grabbed the Gryffindor by the wrist and yanked him into the shadows, pulling him into a disused room. Weasley started when he saw the wand pointed at his face, and the evil grin of the wizard holding it.

"Enjoying your undeserved fame, Weasley?" Harry said icily.

"Potter...you've got..." he swallowed nervously, his eyes focused on Harry's wand. "..you've got some nerve..."

"But not as much as you. I'm impressed Weasley. I didn't think you had the gall to tell the best friend of the most powerful first year in Hogwarts, a student who already dislikes you, that it's too bad that I didn't die. I didn't think you had the idiocy to believe that you did anything worthy of note. Because the three of us all know something rather important. You stood up to Hermione, a girl who is most definitely *not your friend*, because you thought that if you stopped her, I would get caught, and maybe expelled. As it was, I might have been killed. You know, ask her to show you her stomach sometime. There's a little *reminder* there of how *infinitesimal* what you did was compared to what we survived."

Harry paused. "You know, I'll be perfectly honest, Ron. The two of us survived because of good fortune only. So I'm not going to take credit for stopping Voldemort. That credit belongs to my mother for sacrificing her life and to Fate for putting the Stone in the way of the Killing Curse. But I will comfortably say this: I deserve far more credit than you do. Think about that, and watch the behavior of the person who actually earned something. Because when I'm not flaunting it, and you are, well...I'd say that makes you look quite foolish, doesn't it?"

The throng of Gryffindors was approaching. Harry listened intently, then slugged Ron in the jaw. He fell to the ground. "That was not for me. That was for Hermione."

He turned to go. "And if you so much as threaten her next year, I'll show the whole school what a coward you are. Care to duel me, Weasley?"

Ron shook his head violently.

"That's what I thought."

And with that, he left the speechless Gryffindor on the floor, and entered the Great Hall in search of better companionship.

Harry helped Hermione pull her things of the train at Platform 9 3/4, and was immediately pulled into a fierce embrace by a formerly unseen Daphne. Harry returned the embrace as best he could, but when Daphne finally released him, he had to breath heavily. When he looked around, he saw Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who greeted him much more warmly than last time around. Harry and Hermione said their goodbyes, and after a long hug, went their separate ways.

Daphne and Harry left King's Cross and walked over to a run-down looking building a few blocks away. "It's an Apparition station. I've managed to fix the Apparition wards of Dressler Manor to allow us and any other approved guests to Apparate onto the property."

They greeted an elderly wizard and paid him the fee for using the Apparition point. Harry grabbed Daphne's hand and his trunk firmly, and with the feeling of being squeezed through a tube, they vanished from Muggle London.

The old man smiled as he filed some more papers. He'd actually have a story to tell the boys down at the pub. After all, it wasn't everyday that you saw Harry Potter.

End

A/N: So, how'd I do for my first fic? I know it wasn't perfect and had its issues, but what I'm trying to write is different than anything I've ever read before.

ANNOUNCEMENT TO H/HR SHIPPERS COMING AFTER ME WITH PITCHFORKS. SEE MY PROFILE. (It's good news.)

Well, this was quite a bit of fun writing. As you might have guessed, it was completed before I started posting, so that's how I seemingly created a fifteen chapter story in less than a week. Grey Maiden II: Slytherin's Heir, is up to Chapter 3. I'll start posting it tomorrow.

However, as you might have guessed, I can't keep up the pace of two updates a day forever. When I finally do catch up with my writing, I do my best to get an update out at least once every week.

As for Reviews, I'd like to know what you think of certain things:

- 1) Daphne's past
- 2) The Potential Darkness within Harry (I've made references to it a number of times)
- 3) Where the hell this series is going
- 4) Am I really screwed up in the head

I can promise that, despite what you might think, Harry's social life *improves* next year. That might seem impossible, but I'm not bound by canon.

Afterall, who says Ginny gets the diary...?

As for posting it elsewhere, I really can't until I figure out what ship I'm using. When I do that, it'll go to either SIYE or As for the rating, what I'm really scared of is losing potential readers. I do realize chapter 14 is pretty violent, and I stuck a warning in about that. But I'm not going to be making anything M until at least Book 4, and then, it will only be for violence, I'm no Abraxan folks.